Vrenna and the Red Stone

Vrenna and the Red Stone and Other Tales

By Michael E. Shea

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Dedicated to my father, Robert Joseph Shea 1933 - 1994

Contents

Vrenna

The Executioner

Shock

Vrenna and the Red Stone

Mad Cow

Loyalty

Fall of the Knives

The Traffic Jam

The Book of Chaos

Citizen Fred's Book

The Sword of Light

Vrenna and Togaru Village

The Demon Knight

The King's Man

Vrenna and the Slave Pits

The Warlord's Legacy

Vrenna the Pit Fighter

The Weapon

Vrenna and the Bandit Lords

The Deep One

Vrenna and the White

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Vrenna

Vrenna loved cold water. She loved the way it numbed her skin. She loved feeling it roll over her and through her. She loved how it hardened her nipples and flowed through her fingers. It washed days of dirt and sweat off of her skin and next to ten hours of sleep in a real bed, it was the best feeling she knew. She lost herself in those cold waters. Her mind drifted into the sky and below the earth. So it should have been no surprise when she opened her eyes and saw three men standing at her small camp, staring at her through the clear water

of the stream with amazed and hungry eyes.

The man in the center of the three men ran a hand over his bald head. His great belly hung out of the bottom of his stained tunic. A leather chest guard hung around his neck by two fraying shoulder straps. The guard protected no more than a quarter of the fat behemoth's body but he wore it anyway. He held a polished studded club in his right hand.

The small fellow on his right seemed the most dangerous of the three. He held a rough crossbow cocked and knocked with a wicked-looking barbed bolt. The third man held a tarnished short sword in his hand. Unlike his two companions, he did not grin like a fool at the fortune of finding a naked woman bathing in a stream. He certainly stared at her but his look was one of awe, not raw lust. Vrenna had a good idea that would change at the coaxing of his friends.

Vrenna saw the looks in the eyes of the other two and knew the only possible conclusion to this situation. Keeping her face passive and her eyes wide and innocent, she stepped carefully out of the stream. Their eyes widened as the stream revealed her body one inch at a time. She stepped slowly on small bare feet and the three men never blinked. She headed slowly to the right of the three men towards a large willow that reached with large exposed roots into the stream. When she reached the shore she stood with her legs together, the right in front of the left, her hands behind her back, and her head tilted to her right side. Droplets of water rolled down her black raven hair, over her creamy shoulders, and down the smooth curving skin of her back.

The small man with the crossbow stared at her breasts with greed in his eyes. The Great Fat One ran his eyes up and down her body from the curves of her breasts to the patch of black hair between her legs. He looked as roughly as he wanted his hands to run. The sword-wielder's eyes never left her own. She found this most disturbing. She knew what the other two desired and how they would act, but this third could be a problem. Vrenna placed one hand on the large willow and tilted her head the left. A lock of black hair fell over her left eye. Another lock brushed against three horizontal black diamonds on the right side of her neck. The seductive look was the trigger she needed. Men like these never questioned their luck at finding a young naked woman bathing in a brook.

The Great Fat One lumbered towards her, nearly stumbling and falling at her feet all on his own. He reached out with thick sausage-like fingers towards her left breast. His rough index finger just barely

brushed the soft curve of her breast. It was the last touch those fingers ever felt.

Vrenna had foolishly dropped her guard when she let the cool water of the stream caress and hold her with the patience and smoothness of a confident lover. She wasn't unwise to the dangers of traveling alone, however. On the inside of the large willow, tucked between two of the large roots that drank their two hundred year long drink from the flowing river, sat Vrenna's only companion.

She moved faster than lightning. She spun on her heel switching from the pose of innocent seduction to one of a lithe cat. In her previously empty hand she now held a sword of silver and black. Its thin blade shone bright in the morning sun.

The surprised look of the Great Fat One went from the armed woman to the stubs of his missing fingers. Blood jutted out in four pulsing streams. He screamed.

The other two men shook and sprung into action. Just as Vrenna's silver blade turned the Great Fat One's scream into a gurgle of blood flowing freely into his lungs, the small bandit raised and fired his crossbow. Vrenna whirled and cut the bolt out of the air. That was all of the motivation the small bandit needed. He turned and ran.

Vrenna dove, fetching the Great Fat One's club off of the ground and hurled it end over end with air-rushing speed. She heard the satisfying crunch of bone as it crushed in the back of the running bandit's skull.

Vrenna turned and faced the last of the three bandits. He stood unmoving, his sword hanging loosely in his hand and his jaw hanging wide open. She pushed back a lock of her black hair over one ear and stepped towards him, her bare feet stepping light in the muddy ground. His sword fell from his grasp and he raised his hands comically high into the air. She cut three times so fast that the bandit only had time to flinch and blink his eyes. His belt sprang open, his leather tunic fell to his sides, and his pants fell to the ground hanging like mushrooms around the tops of his boots exposing thin white legs.

"Strip."

The word hit the man nearly as violently as her sword. He kicked off his boots with practiced ease and hopped out of his fallen trousers. He let his tunic fall in a pile next to the dirty trousers and put his hands back up. He blushed when Vrenna's own eyes move up and down his frail body. Any excitement he once had was long gone.

"Run."

He did.

Vrenna waited for the last sounds of the man's departure to quiet before searching his clothes and the clothes of the two dead bandits. She found a handful of copper, a silver chain around the bloated severed neck of the Great Fat One, and little else of use. She returned to her own camp, sticking her fine blade into the ground nearby. She pulled on a pair of soft black leather briefs that cut high in the back. She tied a leather corset across her chest leaving her belly bare. Vrenna had little use for cumbersome armor or thick clothing. Movement and speed were her armor. She pulled on a tall pair of black leather boots that folded over half way up her thighs. She sheathed her sword and buckled the wide belt around her thin waste. A leather strap held the blade low on the curve of her left hip. She pulled on a pair of long black gloves that fit like a second skin. Finally she pulled a gray cloak and hood around her shoulders and fastened it with a small silver fastener.

Vrenna looked at the two dead men and then up at the sun gleaming from the canopy of trees above. She'd killed two men and it wasn't even mid-morning yet. It was apt to be a long day.

Author's Notes: I wrote Vrenna from a handwritten draft to a typed, edited, and finished story in about three hours. I wrote it the morning after I dreamed up the character, a cross between Aeon Flux and Conan. This story predates my decision to connect Vrenna's world to the world of Faigon as well. It is one of the few stories that aren't in the south deserts in the ruins of the Old Empire. It was also the first story I ever wrote with nudity and other adult ideas. I decided to put it first in this book as a sort of preview of what's to come. If you don't like a hot wet naked chick cutting people open, there's always Nora Roberts.

The Executioner

Torchlight broke into Thorn's cell like streams of fire. He sat up on his bed slowly and glared at the guard who woke him. The guard dropped his gaze. They always did.

"The execution is at dawn."

Thorn continued his stare and the guard hurried to leave. Thorn stood naked. He stretched to his full height, the firelight of the hallway torch dancing off of his dark skin. He looked out of the barred window

of his cell and saw the dark blue light of the approaching dawn as it overtook the night.

Thorn wrapped a pleated leather kilt around his waist and buckled it with a large bronze buckle. He pulled a black leather tunic, sleeveless and cut low over his chest. His huge chest and arms helped bring the crowd and the tailors of the tunic knew it. Thorn tied two leather wraps around his wrists and palms of his hands. Finally, he put on a dark steel helm shaped like the head of a snarling bull complete with low curling black steel horns.

Thorn looked to wide-bladed sword that sat propped up in the corner of his cell. It was the most famous sword for five hundred miles. It was more famous than Dragontooth, his lord and master's jeweled rapier that now sat unused for years over the lord's bed. It was more famous than Treesplitter, the master-at-arms's two handed greatsword with a hilt of living wood and a dark green blood groove running from tip to hilt. Thorn's people knew his blade as Earthsplitter before the war, but his new masters had a different name. They called it Noble's End. He had killed forty six men with the huge blade before the wars, including ten officers of Faigon's army. Since his capture he had killed thirty more including eighteen gladiators and twelve nobles of Castle Doven. Today it would kill its thirteenth.

The blade was three feet long and five inches wide. The wide blade looked like a slab of thick steel with an edge and a hilt. The hilt was wrapped in leather from the hide of a dire boar slain by Thorn's father nearly forty years ago. The leather grip, all sixteen inches of it, was dark with oil and old blood.

Thorn lifted the blade and felt its cool weight in his hands. The tip of the blade angled in towards the edge giving it the shape of a large cleaver instead of a typical sword. Along the blade, just above the hilt, twelve notches marked the blade for each noble head it cut off.

Thorn stepped out of the cell and walked down the hall where two double doors lay open to the courtyard.

A roar exploded from the crowd of five hundred that watched Thorn step out onto the courtyard. Castle Doven sat behind high walls to the north and the shops of the village surrounded the open royal courtyard where many of the town's events took place. Executions were always popular, only second to gladiator fights.

Thorn held his bull helmed head high and strode to the center of the

courtyard as the cheers of bloodthirsty villagers continued their cries. On a raised platform, Doven's nobles sat in red upholstered chairs accented in gold. An angled canopy edged with flowing silk tapestries protected the noble family from the soon rising sun.

Lord Reynold Alaphin sat surrounded by his extended family. He had two wives, the newest one a spoiled nineteen year old named Jonya Tivora and her son, an equally spoiled and fat six year old named Calven James Alaphin. Reynold's other wife, the venerable twenty two year old Klarissa Windsbow Alaphin was away for two years for a strange and unknown illness.

Lord Alaphin had two brothers and twelve sisters, each with their cash-hungry husbands, wives, and spoiled fat children. Nearly all thirty five family members sat in the pavilion to watch the thirty sixth lose his head to Noble's End.

Johnathan Rudolph Tenevar, second cousin of Jonya Tivora and husband of Reynold Alaphin's sixth sister, Claudette, known adulterer and embezzler of the treasury of Castle Doven, wet the front of his fine red velvet pants when the noble met Thorn's eyes through the huge black bull helm. The two men were from different worlds soon to crash together. Thorn smiled behind the nightmare helm when he saw the look of confusion, denial, and finally fear on the Johnathan's pale face.

The crowd continued to cheer as Thorn walked to the large dark chopping block. Two guards stood in leather three-cornered hats, shining steel breastplates, royal velvet uniforms, and tall leather riding boots folded down at the knee. Eight more guards circled the chopping block, black barreled muskets resting on their shoulders.

A priest of Suun whispered a prayer over Johnathan Tenevar but the doomed fop was not listening. His eyes kept shifting from the noble's rise, where he surely expected a pardon to be spoken, and the huge slab of steel held by the bull-headed monster in front of him.

A castle crier wearing a huge white floppy neck ruffle, a bright pink tunic, and a ridiculously large hat began reading a list of crimes approaching complete nonsense.

The crowd continued to cheer. They didn't care what the man was accused of, today they got to see a noble bleed. Rumors said he stuck his tiny noble prick into the wrong young girl and got her pregnant. Beheading the idiot was easier than bringing in a whole new family

into the royal apartments and so the crimes were fabricated and the execution announced. No doubt the young girl, a mere lass of twelve if rumors held true, thought of velvet beds and four feasts a day instead of her own eviscerated body laying in a ditch after the Lord Reynold's guards got a hold of her.

The prayers of the false priest and the reading of idiotic charges finished. It was time for the real work to begin. The crowd quieted as the two guards pushed Johnathan down on the bloodstained chopping block. One pulled the lose skin of the back of his neck taught while the other held down his legs.

"Wait." Johnathan squeaked in his most aristocratic voice. Thorn looked up to the pavilion and nodded. Lord Reynold nodded back. Thorn raised Noble's End high and swung down hard.

Few who have never seen a beheading understand what forces are really at play. As sharp as Noble's End was, simply pressing the edge of a blade against skin will not cut it. Even with great force, the blade does not sever, it crushes. The thin edge splits open the skin at the base of the neck, crushes the bone of the spine and the thin pink cord it protects. It crushes the windpipe and presses on veins and arteries until they burst. Last, it presses the split skin of the back of the neck through the front of the neck until the pressure of the blade against the soft wood of the block finally splits the skin apart. It is not a pretty sight.

It was not a pretty sight for Sir Johnathan Rudolf Tenevar. His head spun face up and flew forward out of the hands of the guard holding the back of his neck. His mouth was wide open as were his still unbelieving eyes. His decapitated body shot upright squirting blood in intermittent gouts into the air. A long stream sprayed across the front of Thorn's helm and chest. The body fell onto its side, continuing to squirt blood into a growing pool.

The crowd roared in bloodthirsty glee. Thorn slashed the huge sword to his side sending a line of red blood across the ground. He looked back up at the grim faces of the nobles who sent one of their own to die by Thorn's hand. Thorn's eyes met those of the small fat boy, Calvin Alaphan. The boy stared at Thorn with wide-eyed horror before burying his head into his mother's narrow chest. Thorn smiled behind the black steel helm.

Johnathan Tenevar's spray of lifebood blood across Thorn's face and the look he gave Tanya Alaphan's fat child changed Thorn's life

forever.

The door of Thorn's cell slammed shut behind him. Sweat flowed down his bare chest in long rivers. His dark hair hung in wet strands in front of his eyes. He set his training club against the wall next to the door. Tufts of black hair and drying blood hung on its splintered head.

Two of the fourteen slave gladiators with which Thorn had sparred had died today. Two others were maimed; one with a broken leg stabbing out of his gushing calf and another with an arm that had been twisted nearly entirely around. They were Voth slaves as was Thorn, big and dark-skinned. Every day they got better with the swords and axes and spears with which they fought. One of them nearly opened up Thorn's belly with a palm knife. Thorn had caved in his skull with his training club. He didn't spar with a blade. It wouldn't be fair and Lord Alaphin wouldn't have any gladiators left when the games arrived this fall.

Thorn's door creaked open and small feet wrapped in silk sandals stepped in. Thorn let her aroma reach his nostrils. Valenda. Thorn turned and smiled. Valenda's green eyes gleamed and she smiled back.

Her skin was soft and pale, not hardened under the burning sun like Thorn's. She was slender and wore only two bands of thin silk around her breasts and waist. Sunlight reflected off of tiny flecks of glitter in the outer corners of her eyes. Long straight black hair cascaded down her bare shoulders. Her tongue touched her upper red lip.

She set a wash basin steaming with hot water on the room's only table and drew out a thick wet cloth. She began to gently wipe the dirt and sweat and blood from Thorn's chest. Her delicate fingers traced the swirling tattoos on his chest, now faded from nearly constant exposure to the sun. She followed the swirls of ancient script and symbols to the bestial gods of the Voth.

She was from the deep south deserts, she had once told Thorn on one of the few nights where they spoke. She was born a slave, as was her mother, and was continually traded across the deserts and the seas. She spent her teenage years in the harem of a pirate king until a Faigon noble bought her and gave her as a gift to Lord Alaphin. His wife had little use for a pleasure slave, however, and at the age of nineteen, she was far too old for Reynold Alaphin's tastes. Her extraordinary skills would not go to waste however, and the nobles gave her as the top reward to the mightiest gladiator in Castle Doven's slave pits. For the last ten years, that had been Thorn.

Thorn made love to her violently, grunting and roaring like an animal. The word love had little to do with his actions, however. To him, sex was the end victory of violence. For him the actions in the gladiator pits and his actions in bed were of little difference. Valenda didn't seem to mind. She met his fury with her own cries of pleasure, surprisingly real. As for Valenda's pleasuring of Thorn, she was very good at her job.

Later, Thorn watched her wrap her thin band of silk around her waist, tying it high on her right hip. What would happen to her as age began to take her beauty? Thorn hadn't felt love for anyone since the last days of the Voth wars, but he couldn't help wondering what fate awaited the beautiful pleasure slave. Valenda turned, giving Thorn a glimpse of her beautiful creamy breasts before wrapping another band of silk around her chest, deftly tying a large bow in the back. She smiled at Thorn and stepped out of his cell.

Thorn laid back on his lambskin mattress and slept.

Thunder roared and walls of rain washed over the fields of the Three Stones. Thorn let the rain wash over his face and down the long braid of his hair. It washed over his boiled leather breastplate, following the dozens cuts that criss-crossed across its hard surface. Thorn's left hand held the reigns of Firehoof, his black steed. He could feel the wild beast coiled like bent steel under him. His right hand held Earthsplitter. Lightning reflected off the wide steel blade and water rand down to its angled tip.

Around Thorn, fifty riders of the Voth prepared to charge. The Voth king called them Hell's Axe, and now they prepared on the west flank of Faigon's musketeers.

Five hundred yards ahead, musket fire mixed with the clashes of steel and the cries of the dying. The battle raged for hours but still the Faigon commander had not sent in his reserve musketeers. Until he did, Thorn would wait. Then he heard it; leather boots marching in formation. The reserves stepped out of the woods towards the center of the battle.

Thorn placed his direwolf skull helm over his head. He felt range and bloodlust burn through him. He raised Earthsplitter high over his head and kicked Firehoof into a full gallop. All around him, the fifty riders of Hell's Axe rode hard.

It was said that Firehoof held the blood of demon's in his veins. Thorn was the only man to control the black steed but Thorn knew that no one controlled Firehoof. Thorn just hung on for the ride.

The world slowed and thunder crashed as the fifty riders roared in. Thorn held his breath. The closest musketeers had not yet seen them. The soldiers in their gray uniforms and three-cornered hats fired into the center of the battle, sending led balls into Voth warriors and Faigon pikemen alike. Time continued to slow. Thorn squeezed his teeth together and continued to hold his thirty pound blade high into the air.

Thorn fixed his eyes on the closest musketeer, a blond boy of perhaps seventeen winters. The boy saw something in the corner of his eye and began to turn. Thorn felt the thudding of Firehoof beating into the soft wet earth. The boy's eyes focused and saw the wolf-headed rider and the black steed riding him down. The boy's expression began to turn to sheer nightmarish terror but never fully reached it.

Thorn's blade met hardly any resistance at all as it split the boy's head in half horizontally through the bridge of his nose. The fifty riders pierced into the reserve musketeers like the tip of a knife into soft dough. Leather hats filled with blood spun through the air. The sound of spears, lances and swords piercing through steel breastplates rang in the night air. Muskets were split in half and wide-bladed swords cleaved through arms and heads.

Thorn caught sight of the reserve unit's commander. Large rolls of fat pressed out of the commander's uniform like overstuffed sausage. The commander held an ornate saber that looked more like jewelry than a weapon. Thorn kicked Firehoof into a gallop. He saw the commander draw a flintlock pistol and fire at the wolf-headed hellspawn that prepared to ride him down. Thorn heard the ball zip past the left side of his head. Thorn roared to Kavashek the Bear God and rode harder.

When he met the officer, the force of his swing added to the power of Firehoof's gallop was beyond measure. The officer appeared to explode from the waist up. Rolls of pink intestines, burst organs, and white bone filled the air.

Blood pumping through him like liquid fire, Thorn reeled Firehoof around for another target. Only then did he see the second reserve now on their flank. The gleaming steel of five hundred bayonets fixed to the black uncaring eyes of five hundred muskets stared down at Hell's Axe and then roared into life. Three lead balls and the bits of cloth they carried with it, bits of cloth that would nearly kill Thorn from infection days later, punched holes through Thorn's leather breastplate and tore into his leg and arm. He fell back off of Firehoof and heard the horse screaming as Thorn's vision went black. All around him, Hell's Axe shattered under Faigon's muskets.

Calvin's screams echoed through Castle Doven like shattering glass. Dressed in his night tunic, gray trousers, and his gun belt, Jovalin Vandorn, master-at-arms of Castle Doven, ran down the corridor to the bedroom of Jonya Tivora and her son.

Lord Reynold burst out of his own twin-doored master bedroom, his nightshirt hanging down to his bare knees. Jovalin's razor-sharp vision caught the darting naked figure of a young girl slipping out of the side entrance of the well-designed king's bedroom. He had picked an older one this evening, it appeared, thought Jovalin.

The two men burst into Jonya's bedroom and saw her holding young Calvin to her chest. The boy's thumb was in his mouth and huge tears rolled down his fat cheeks.

"He had a dream. A vision!" Jonya's own tears fell from her hollow cheeks and her voice cracked with hysterics. Her thin bony arms stuck out from her ornate silk nightgown grasping her son with claw-like hands. She had lost nearly forty pounds since she and Reynold no longer shared the same bed. Some said she had the same sickness as Reynold's older wife, but her chambermaids often whispered that she tickled her throat with a feather and vomited up her meals. She had wanted to look more appealing to her husband's young tastes but ended up looking more like a skeleton each day. Jovalin made it his business to learn what everyone in Castle Doven had to say, from his lord to the chamberpot cleaners. No doubt even this late-night shrieking was just another attempt to capture her husband's attention.

"He saw a vision!"

"The bull-man!" Calvin's thumb popped out of his mouth and his whiny voice cracked and squeaked. "He came for me and mother! He came for you!" Calvin pointed at his father. "He had his big sword and it was all bloody!"

"He is ours, lad." Lord Reynold spoke softly but with more than a hint of impatience. "He only hurts who we tell him to hurt."

"He killed uncle Arden and uncle Benji and aunt Fileora. He killed our family!" The boy began wailing again.

"Do something, Reynold," Jovya hissed.

"He brings villagers from one hundred leagues. He fills the market purses with gold. Everyone comes to see him."

"He kills our family!" Jovya screamed.

"We will not have noble blood on our hands, m'lady." Jovalin spoke softly. "He does it so we don't have to. No noble will ever kill another noble."

"And how much noble blood washes the hands of this Voth slave?" Jovya pulled a sagging breast from her nightgown and forced it into Calvin's mouth. The fat boy sucked greedily and loud. Jovalin tried hard to hide his disgust.

"He is an atrocity. A demon." Jovya spoke over the wet noises of her son's suckling. "He cares not if he spills noble blood or his own brothers. He has no respect for us. He does not know our superiority, our station. His Voth sword falls on Royal necks and every head that falls shows him and our people that we are the same as them - less than them! We let ourselves be killed by a Voth!"

Reynold looked at his wife and then to Jovalin.

"Shoot him." Reynold turned and headed out, whispering under his breath. "Perhaps that will keep his whimpering down for a few nights. He and that skinny bitch."

Jovalin looked to Jonya who stared defiantly back. She had victory in her eyes. Jovalin nodded and left.

Jovalin ordered two of his men to shoot the slave tonight behind the barracks. As they left the castle, Jovalin sat down at his angled writing desk, dipped a quill, and penned a letter to Lord Avadery of Castle Davenport. It was time he sought new employment.

Jovalin had served Castle Doven for twenty years. He lived his fifty years with one rule: be careful and make no mistakes. This night, in the lateness of the hour and in his disgust at his lords and ladies, he had made two. One was sending his two men, as skilled as they were, without seeing to the order himself. The second was missing the thin shadow that slipped past his door and out into the night.

"Apparently she hasn't had enough, tonight." The guards of the gladiator barracks laughed and one slapped Valenda on her rump as she walked down the rows of cells. The hall guard smiled as she opened Thorn's door and stepped inside.

Thorn could tell immediately that something was wrong.

"The vomiting princess and her bastard son have marked you, Thorn. The boy's dream spoke of your taste for noble blood. Lord Alaphin appeased her by ordering your death. They send guards to shoot you as we speak."

Valenda stepped forward and pressed a steel spike, ten inches long, into Thorn's calloused palm.

"Bite them first."

Valenda kissed Thorn hard. He felt her mouth open and their tongues touched. He pressed harder. He circled a muscled arm around her thin waist and crushed her to him. When she stood back, Thorn saw a drop of blood on her lip. She smiled. Then she was gone like a whisper of silk in a breeze. Thorn heard hard boot heels approaching in the hallway.

The four guards came with practiced steps and perfectly measured performance. Two of the guards, David and Pervusal, were Jovalin's own guard. Like their lord, they took no chances. They did not hit Thorn or insult him. When they entered, one immediately collected up Thorn's club and Noble's End. The other asked Thorn to join him in the courtyard. Without the spike in his hand and Valenda's warning, Thorn would have died that night in the dirt behind the gladiator barracks.

The two gladiator barrack guards walked behind Thorn with musket barrels pointed at his back. Behind them, Sergeant David walked with Thorn's club and sword. In front, Sergeant Pervusal walked to the open gates at the end of the hall.

Thorn knew he was dead if they reached the end of the hall. The two behind him weren't much of a problem. The barrels of their guns were nearly pressing into the flesh of his back. Thorn knew both men were drinkers, slow of wit and slow of hand. Thorn would have just a moment before the sergeant up front would be able to turn and fire his owl-hammered flintlock pistol. The sergeant behind, however was

a much greater problem. Even though he held Thorn's sword and club, Thorn had little doubt that the young man could draw fast.

Twenty feet remained in front of Sergeant Pervusal. Thorn had no choice. He would leave his fate to the gods.

Thorn spun in a single motion out of the way of one gun barrel and pushing the other away with his left hand. Both barrels fired. One lead ball cracked against the stone wall. The other hit sergeant Pervusal in the small of his back. In the same spin and sweep, Thorn stabbed six of the ten inches of the spike in the ear of one of the musket wielding guards. The man's eyes went wide and his teeth chattered in nervous spasms as death took him.

Thorn was right about Sergeant David behind him. The man dropped thorn's weapons, drew his own black and silver flintlock pistol, and fired. Thorn grabbed the tunic of the remaining guard behind him and pulled him into the steel bullet. The bullet exploded through the guard's chest but the force of the shot was gone. The bullet smacked thorn's chest and fell to the ground.

Thorn scooped up one of the muskets as he rushed the sergeant. David dropped his pistol and started to draw his gold saber but Thorn got there first. Thorn swung the musket hard by the barrel and hit the sergeant with the edge of the stock. The crack of David's skull echoed down the hall.

Thorn picked up the huge blade, Noble's End, and began to run down the hall of the gladiator's cells. He stopped, however, and ran back to his own cell. One final object retrieved, Thorn ran smiling from the gladiator's cells.

Jovalin looked at the bodies of his men. How had things gone so wrong, he thought. How did this happen? He should have been here. David and Pervusal were good but Jovalin would have seen that the slave had meant to do violence. Even with four men, Jovalin would have bound the barbarian's hands or found the spike now buried in a guard's ear. Jovalin only had to shoot one other gladiator before learning of Thorn's last visitor, the one who surely had tipped him off and armed him.

Jovalin put his hands on his twin flintlocks of black steel and redwood grips. Each gun had two barrels, one over the other, and two hammers shaped like shark teeth. Jovalin ran his fingers over their rough edge with nervous energy.

"Sir. Sergeant Pervusal is alive."

Jovalin knelt down to the sergeant. Pervusal's face was ghost white. A pool of blood grew from the two inch hole punched through the back of his steel breastplate.

"We disarmed him but he hit the guard with something and the other shot me in the back. He broke us down like rotten wood. Someone told him."

"I know, son. Don't worry about that. Where did he go?"

"He ran past me but turned and went back to his cell. Then he fled with something under his arm."

"He went back to his cell after getting away from you?"

Pervusal coughed. "Yes."

Jovalin stood and beckoned two of his guards to take him to the healers of the church. Jovalin walked back to Thorn's cell and examined the sparse room. What would Thorn come back for? What was missing now? The barbarian already had his sword and he left the worthless club on the ground. Jovalin looked to the table and his eyes went wide. He left with a twirl of his black cloak and yelled to his remaining men.

"Sergeant Vorhees, get your men to the courtyard and bring the whore Valenda with you."

"We're bringing the whore to search with us?" The sergeant looked

confused.

"No. Take her to the chopping block. He hasn't left yet."

The stars of midnight pierced the black sky but the old gods blessed Thorn with a moonless night. Thorn lay face down on the roof of the smithy and metalwork shop overlooking the courtyard where Thorn brought so many of the townsfolk to see his bloody acts. A hundred scratches and bruises covered his naked chest and arms. A tattered loincloth and leather wrapped sandals were his only protection. His heavy wide-bladed sword sat tight in his grip.

He heard her scream and heard the slap of a fist on soft flesh before he saw her. Two castle guards dragged Valenda to the block where only earlier that morning Thorn had taken Johnathan's head. Two more guards and Jovalin, the castle's master-at-arms stood by the block. The older man ran his eyes over the surrounding area. Lantern light gleamed off of the black hammers of his flintlock pistols hanging low on his hips and the hilt of Treesplitter, the greatsword strapped to his back. He dug the hard heels of his glove soft brown leather boots into the dirt. His own gold-adorned black steel breastplate matched the darkness of the night.

Valenda's silken clothes hung in tatters around her chest and waist but Jovalin ripped off what remained, leaving her naked in the night air. Her soft pale skin and smooth curves stood in stark contrast to the steel and leather armor of the five men around her. Jovalin's eyes scanned the buildings from under his brown leather three-cornered hat. The master-at-arms turned and punched Valenda in the face with his leather-gloved hand. Thorn heard her nose break from one hundred yards away. Jovalin punched her hard in the stomach and she crumpled to the ground gasping for air.

Two of the guards lifted her and bent her over the chopping block. She cried out through the blood pouring from her nose and mouth when one of them forced himself into her.

Thorn watched with cold eyes as each of the four men took her again and again. All the while, Jovalin's eyes scanned the surrounding buildings. A shine of lantern light reflected off of a long barrel of metal from a roof of one of the opposite buildings. Thorn looked at other buildings and saw similar barrels each tracking across the courtyard. To drop from the roof and rush the five men meant being ripped apart by a dozen musket balls.

A more noble man would not have cared about the death that would find him in the streets. A more noble man would have dove from the roof, run to the block with his blade high hoping to cleave through the

men at the block before the tiny balls of lead tore into him. A more noble man would have loved Valenda and would have died trying to save her. Thorn lost his nobility when he lay in a cell, his insides rotting and three holes still burning in his body. When he awoke a month later emaciated and beaten, he was no longer the hellrider of the Voth, he was something else. If Thorn ever possessed any such nobility, it had died with him on the hills of Three Stones.

When they had finished, Jovalin shook his head, drew one of his pistols, and put a bullet in Valenda's unconscious brain.

The sewer system of Castle Doven was one of the oldest known systems in the northern reaches of Faigon. The river Eisen flowed from the north of the castle's west side down to the south. A long bypass and series of canals brought water to the eastern fields and through the twin villages that supported the castle. One large channel flowed into the castle itself and spread through a network of tunnels and pipes and back to the channel that fed the river to the south. The land where the village channels met was known as the black join. Dozens of slaves known as Blackkeepers dug through the rivers and mountains of waste that often clogged or broke down the walls of the canals. Hundreds of slaves died from those lands. Diseases horrible and deadly ripped apart the unlucky Blackkeepers. The skin slid off of their bones. Their teeth and hair fell out. They vomited and shat until their organs ruptured. A sentence serving the Black Join was a sentence of death.

In his ten years, Thorn heard many escape plans. Some were perfectly simple until a musket ball tore open the escapee's chest. Others of amazing complexity were passed along from slave to slave like an old tale of lore or a family heirloom never to be attempted.

One of these treasured plans spoke of escape through the sewers of the castle itself. A body servant of the Lord Reynold's half brother, Jason, sick of the man's perversions had told a sparring partner of Thorn's of the great maw that brought the noble shite out into the Black Join. The grate that protected the tunnel was nearly rusted through from centuries of decay. Thorn had no use for the information at the time but it served him well now. The Black Join and the tunnel that fed it was almost completely unguarded.

Thorn waded hip-deep in the thick black waters of the Black Join. The smell was maddening. He retched continually but the determination in his heart was stronger than the stench of a thousand sewers.

Only one guard watched these foul lands. He had made no sound at all when Thorn had pulled back his head so violently that his neck snapped and his head fell between his own shoulder blades.

Thorn found the castle's main sewer and the ironwork grate was indeed nearly rusted through. Bar by bar, Thorn ripped or pried apart the rotted iron bars. His hands bled and the lines of a hundred infected scratches crossed his body but soon the bars left a hole just big enough to accept Thorn's massive body.

Thorn followed the sewers deep below the subbasements of the castle. Huge hairless rats with milky white eyes sniffed at the air. Something big and wet moved back in the shadows with a sickening thud and the sound of suction. Thorn came across the bloated white corpse of a slave who apparently died trying this escape before. His hands and feet had been gnawed off but his eyes stared at Thorn as he passed.

Thorn followed the network of sewers for an hour. At one point he had to completely submerge himself in the thick liquid of waste and swim down a tube just big enough for him to squeeze in. His lungs and eyes burned as he crawled though the tube, propelling himself with his fingers and toes. If the tunnel narrowed even a few more inches, Thorn would be trapped and drown in the feces of the nobles sleeping above him.

Again the old bestial gods of the Voth smiled on Thorn and the tube let out into a large pool. Firelight danced from a grate twenty feet above his head.

His hair hanging down his back and in front of his face, Thorn looked up at the firelight with murder in his eyes and in the set of his jaw and the leather wrapped hilt of Noble's End in his right hand. In his left, he held the possession that demanded his return to his cell: the shining black steel bull-headed helmet. Holding the helm by one sharp black horn, Thorn placed the helmet over his head.

With bleeding fingers, Thorn climbed the slick stone wall of the chamber and with a powerful blast of his palm, broke into the kitchen of Castle Doven.

An old woman in a canvas apron stood as still as death as the bull-headed monster crawled out of the drain of the large kitchen. Her eyes were wide open and her mouth mumbled strange words. Thorn stood his full height, his huge blade in his hand and locked eyes with the woman. He saw the swirling faded blue tattoos streaming down the side of her neck and down the wrinkled skin of her left arm. Then he recognized the strange words she spoke. It had been ten years since he had heard a prayer to the old gods of the Voth. The woman twisted her hands together into a knot, a hand symbol of the god Mokncne Blackclaw. Thorn walked past the old Voth woman and into the foray of Castle Doven.

Echoes of shouts, the ringing of steel smashing on steel, and the loud pops of gunfire followed in Thorn's wake.

Minutes later, Thron climbed the stairs leading to the Noble's quarters. Blood flowed down his naked chest and dripped in long strings from the blade of Noble's End. Two deep wounds crossed his chest and a charred circular hole of a musket ball in his shoulder oozed dark blood. Much of the blood that covered Thorn's body was not his own. Behind him, Thorn left a wake of decapitated heads, severed arms and legs, dismembered and disemboweled bodies. Wounded guards screamed for help as their innards flowed out of huge wounds in their bellies and through their own grasping hands. Blood, skin, and hair caked Thorn's heavy blade.

Already seven nobles had tried to escape down the second floor's only stairwell but met Thorn halfway up. Roaring, he cut into them. Many continued to think that their nobility would somehow armor their soft skin. Lord Philip Alaphin, Reynold's third oldest brother, stood and shouted orders at Thorn just before Thorn's blade cut him open from throat to groin with a cut so deep that it spread nearly as wide as the man's shoulders. The other nobles screamed and cowered as his blade chopped into them one by one.

One noble, Lord Dennith Alabaster, stared at the ruin that had once been his wife before Thorn's blade had flayed her open. The tall noble turned with eyes deep in shock to behold Thorn towering above him. Thorn smashed the hilt of his blade into the man's face. Thorn grabbed the front of the man's tunic and tore it off with one quick motion. The man stood confused and nearly unconsciousness, blood streamed down his face, as he watched Thorn draw off his helmet.

Jovalin stood at the end of the hallway of the Noble's apartments. His twin black pistols sat in his hands, all four hammers cocked back. Treesplitter sat strapped tight along his back. Torchlight gleamed off of his black and gold breastplate and his eyes watched the opposite stairwell sharply under the pointed brim of his leather hat. His tall soft leather boots, folded down at the knee, stood motionless against the stone floor.

He had heard the screams and chaos below. He watched those idiot nobles rush out of their apartments and down the stairs against his advice. He could only imagine how the guards below, filled with panic and dread, fired into the floor or the sky or each other as the slave executioner hacked through them. Panic and fear hurt people's aim.

For the entire battle, Jovalin stood and waited for the bull-headed barbarian to step up the spiral of the opposite stairwell. A torch burned brightly at that end of the hallway. Just before stepping into it, Jovalin would fill the barbarian with four steel balls from these pistols he had taken from a pirate slavelord fifteen years earlier. He had known since the minute he realized that Thorn had returned for his helm, that this might be the end. He had hoped the hot barbarian would have rushed out to defend his pleasure slave but even then he knew the odds were slim. It all came down to this. Thorn would come up the stairs, and Jovalin would shoot him dead. He lifted the twin-barreled pistols and aimed at the hall ahead.

He saw the torchlight shining off of the black steel horns first. Then the huge bull head, tilted down rose over the edge of the stairs. Jovalin pushed back the urge to fire at the head knowing even these fine pistols had shot poorly at a target that small. He heard the footsteps coming up the stone stairs one by one. Jovalin was almost disappointed to see the stagger in the man's steps, obviously one of the guards below had gotten a lucky shot. The bull head rose and the memories of the huge blade falling on the heads of noble men and women flashed past Jovalin. Light fell across the figure's bare chest. He raised his guns and fired all four shots.

Jovalin had survived the Voth war and served as master-at-arms for so long by making few mistakes. More importantly, Jovalin had learned to recognize his mistakes and begin to fix them as early as possible instead of denying or burying them. As the hallway filled with the smoke of his guns, he realized his mistake. The skin was too pale and not well muscled. His hands were empty, not carrying the huge sword. Jovalin had fired his guns into another man, not Thorn. Jovalin had

been the second man in the villages of Castle Doven to ever kill a noble and he realized this when he saw the first rushing towards him.

Jovalin had no time to reload. Thorn ran towards him, leaping over Denneth Alaphin's destroyed body, and holding Noble's End in both hands. Torchlight reflected green off of the two hundred year old blade as Jovalin drew it off of his back in a fluid and practiced motion. His great grandfather had forged the blade in the mountains of the north and cooled it in a stream under a new moon on the holiest days of Suun. Jovalin had carried the greatsword into the war against the Voth and had killed nearly two dozen Voth warriors with it. The sword was a symbol of the strength of Castle Doven military might.

It shattered into a hundred pieces when Noble's End smashed into it and cleaved open Jovalin's chest from shoulder to shoulder, splitting his sternum and the heart underneath. Jovalin watched his lifeblood pour out from the ungodly wound in his chest. He saw the hellfire in Thorn's eyes and knew he was a fool to stand in the way of such a force. It was the last thought he ever had.

Thorn spat on the dead corpse of Castle Doven's master-at-arms. He walked back to the body of the noble he had used as bait. Ten years ago, Thorn lost fifty men by falling into a trap like this. He would never do it again. Thorn pulled the helmet off of the smoking corpse and pulled it over his own head. Blood from the noble trapped within the helm poured down Thorn's back and chest. Thorn took a deep breath and headed to the double doors of Lord Reynold Alaphin's chambers.

Thorn would never have considered himself lucky but the old gods had smiled on him twice before this day and they smiled once again. Thorn would have caught an entire chestful of lead shot from Reynold's massive blunderbuss but the panicked lord had overfilled the powder by nearly twofold. When Thorn kicked in the doors, all he saw was an explosion of red blood and fire as the lord of Castle Doven blew his upper torso into pieces.

Thorn barked out laughter and turned back into the hall. A whimper from the room across the way grabbed his attention. He turned and with a kick as powerful as five men, Thorn splintered the door between him and Lady Jonya and her fat son, Calvin. Thorn's eyes met the eyes of the spoiled soft child whose nightmares had started this night tumbling in its bloody direction. Thorn saw the boy's terror as the boy beheld the bull-headed monster covered from head to toe in the blood of the boy's family. The boy's eyes fell to the shining slab of sharp steel in Thorn's hand. Thorn smiled and stepped inside.

For decades to come, the villagers told the tale of the Executioner's cleansing of Castle Doven. They would tell of his past deeds, the jealousy of a spoiled queen and her spoiled son. They would tell of the shadow that fell over the road as Thorn made his way south, with the bull head helm under his arm and Noble's End in his hand.

They would speak of the night that their two worlds, the peasant villagers and the nobles who ruled them, came crashing together in an ocean of blood and a mountain of bodies. They always ended the tale by describing the ear splitting scream of Jonya and her son. The scream that ended when the heavy blade fell twice on the cowering pair. Thorn the Executioner had received his blood-soaked revenge.

Author's Notes: The seed of the Executioner came from the introduction dialog of "Shogun Assassin" a black and white Japanese samurai movie that had some connection to the Lone Wolf and Cub stories. I wrote the entire story, wrote a Shogun Assassin style

introduction, and then cut it out when I realized, with the help of a few editors, that the introduction stole a lot from the rest of the story.

Executioner is a bloody story with no real hero. Thorn is really a noble man who died in a war ten years earlier and just can't seem to fall down yet. He isn't very deep in this story and a couple of times his decisions break from the reader's wishes; once when he lets Valenda die and again when he murders a defenseless woman and child. Thorn is most likely going to come up in other stories. The initial character of Thorn actually came from a Brom painting of the same name.

Shock

Jack looked up from the press-wood table when Frank opened the door. There was concern in the Jack's eyes, though the kid tried to hide it behind the innocent yet half asleep look most teenagers used when they wanted to avoid something.

"Jack. My name's Frank Calhoon." Frank took out the black leather wallet and opened it up to the intimidating credentials inside. He let Jack get a good long look at them. "I'm a federal agent with the Department of Homeland Security." Frank waited a few seconds to let Jack's mind wrap around the badge and the title. Then he placed down his ace.

"I brought you a Coke." Frank put the cold red can in front of the boy.

"Thanks." Jack's voice was low for his age. It was a voice that could seduce a college freshman out of her blue jeans if it wasn't attached to an awkward high school sophomore.

The coke was an easy trick but it beat the hell out of the bullying and muscle flexing most agents in his line liked to use. It was his favorite weapon.

He waited for Jack to swallow.

"You like Hole?" Frank asked.

"They're ok. The shirt is my brother's."

"Who do you listen to?"

"Manson."

"That guy creeps me out." Frank got a lucky break here. "My son

listens to him. His remake of Sweet Dreams is sort of fun. A little loud at times, but fun. My daughter likes Britney Spears. Yeah, I know." Frank nodded at Jack's prune-faced disgust. "My house is like a sixteen hour long Pepsi commercial." Jack snorted. Frank let a few more moments pass.

"Why are you here, Jack?"

"You tell me. I have no idea."

Frank gave the kid a good long look before speaking again. "You remember when the power went out at the Schaumburg mall? The cops here asked around and a couple of kids pointed you out. They told some pretty fantastic stories but we had a look at your record anyway." Frank held up a thick manila folder. "Frankly, the story doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but we don't fool around anymore when it comes to terrorism. There was enough loose thread in here that it was worth bringing you in.

"But I would like to hear it from your side. Why do you think you're here?"

Jack looked at Frank for a moment, his fidgety fingers remained still.

"My braces."

Frank sat back in his chair and waited for Jack to continue.

"When I was thirteen, my mom told me I was getting braces. She told me I had teeth like David Letterman. I had a couple of fillings put in a year before and when they were tightening the braces their wrench, or whatever it was, sparked off of one of my fillings. It knocked me out.

"Everything was fine, though. The braces hurt like hell but I was ok. They told my mother it was just a 'complication'.

"One morning I realized I could do things. My alarm clock went off and I snoozed it about three times. On the fourth time I realized I snoozed it without touching it. I looked at it and the numbers flashed 12:00 at me. I thought about it all day and when I got home I sat on my bed and did it again.

"I can't really describe how I did it. I ... pulled it. I pulled it with my mind and the power would go out of it. It felt like tugging on a rubber band. I would feel it stretch and the power would go out. When I let go, the power went back on again. Eventually I pulled harder and it snapped. The clock never worked again. I had to get my mom to buy me a new clock. I told her I dropped it.

"During the year I tried messing around with other electronics but it gave me headaches so I usually stopped. I couldn't do more than make a light bulb dim. I got the braces off a year after they put them on and the power stopped for a while. Then one day I was sitting at breakfast and looking at my mom's toaster. I could still feel the tiny bands in my head, bands I could pull and stretch.

"I felt something else too. It's hard to describe. I could push. It was like blowing water through a straw. I could feel electricity inside the circuits of the toaster. I could pull them out or I could push them in. I pushed the toaster and it exploded. I woke up in the hospital with a huge headache. I had been unconscious for hours. My parents thought it was the exploding toaster and kept talking about suing GE.

"They did a whole bunch of tests, cat scans and MREs."

"MRI's," Frank corrected.

"Yeah, with that machine that sits on you and bangs. They didn't find anything wrong with me and no one ever mentioned the toaster again. My dad never did send a letter off to GE.

"The entire time I was at the hospital I remembered what I felt. I saw the toaster behind me. I saw coils of red metal and tiny bundles of

wire. I felt the tiny little computer chip that powers the clock. I felt the two huge cables of copper going into the electrical plug.

"I got home and didn't do anything for a while. I didn't know what had happened to me but I could feel my alarm clock again. I pulled it once or twice, it was much easier this time, but I never did anything more than that. I could feel electricity flowing through it like a river splitting into a web of tiny streams. It was like marbles in a tube jerking back and fourth over and over again. All I had to do was pull on them and out they came. All I had to do was push on them and they exploded like the toaster.

"I read something in a video game magazine about pilots who played in flight sims a long long time. Neural pathways in their brain changed to fit the flight sim they played. When they got out and tried to walk down the street they fell over because it burnt new definitions of motion and balance into their head. I thought this might have happened to me. My mind got used to the braces and whatever they did to me and it simply kept on doing it when the braces were gone."

Frank listened closely to Jack. Jack wasn't lying, he knew that much, but the boy didn't seem crazy either. The kid believed what he was saying. There were also the reports.

"What happened with Rick Phillips?"

Jack shuffled in his chair and his eyes went to the mirrored two-way glass on the wall. Frank switched tactics.

"Who was he?"

"Rick was a junior when I was a freshman, about nine months ago."

"Who's Marcy?"

Jack's eyes shot to Frank. Any glaze of teenage apathy or nervousness fled from those hawk's eyes. This is what Frank was looking for.

"Marcy was my best friend." There was no doubt from those eyes. However Marcy felt about Jack, Jack didn't just think of her as his friend. He was in love with her.

Jack broke the hawk's stare and seemed to think for a moment. He made some sort of decision. When he spoke again it wasn't with the one or two word answers most teenagers speak. Frank wouldn't need a crowbar to get information out of Jack like he would any other teenager. Jack wanted to tell his story. Frank only hoped the recording equipment worked well in the observation room.

"Marcy was one of the few girls who would even talk to a guy like me. She was a freshman the same year I was and knew one of the guys I used to eat lunch with. We spent a lot of time together that year. We ate lunch; we talked on the phone until early in the morning; we went out and watched old Hitchcock movies together. She was beautiful but we never...hooked up." Jack spit out these last two words like a bad piece of meat.

"She was my best friend for a year and a half and now she won't talk to me." Jack thought for a moment more and continued.

"Half way through my freshman year she and Rick Philips started going out. He didn't ask her out so much as tell her. 'We're going to the Outback Friday night, babe.' was the way he picked up his women. It drove me crazy but it didn't last long. She told me he was pushy. They broke up only three weeks or so after going out. Rick's father was some rich lawyer or business executive. They had an apartment on Lake Shore Drive in the same building Oprah lived in, but their home was here in Schaumburg.

"He and I had gym class around the same time during the second semester of my sophomore year. We were in the locker room after class when it happened." Jack took a deep breath and drank more of his Coke. Frank could see he came to another decision. Jack, glanced again to the mirrored glass on the wall, looked down again, and continued.

"I'm minding my own business when he comes over and leans on the lockers. God he pissed me off. I hated his perfect tan, his washboard abs, his skater hair. I hated everything about him.

'You still hanging around Marcy Jones?' he said. I told him I was.

'You fucked her yet?' I didn't say anything but he continued anyway. 'You're missing out, man. She cried a little bit the first time but opened up a lot after that. She loved doing it in the park. You should tap that if you have the chance, hoss.'

"I didn't know why he wanted to pick a fight with me but I really didn't care. I saw the gleam in his eye. I saw the look on his face and I knew he told the truth. I saw his slick body and his slick hair. I saw her laying on a blanket at Sunset Park with her little blue dress pushed up and his asshole hands on her white legs. I saw the same gleam in his eye that she must have seen when he pushed himself inside her. I saw the Casio X-shock diver's watch on his wrist and I saw tiny threads of current vibrating inside it. He took the only girl I ever loved, the only girl who ever loved me, and he fucked her in a park. And worse, she let him do it." Jack looked again at Frank with the hawk's eyes.

"I pushed his watch. I pushed hard."

Frank had seen the ER photos of the wound. It looked like a lion bit out a huge chunk of Rick's wrist. Only a ribbon of flesh and the tendons of his index finger and thumb held his hand to his arm. The bones of his wrist splintered like a tree hit by lightning. They amputated the arm a few minutes after the photos were taken.

Frank also saw the crime scene photos. One of the lockers, the one Rick had been leaning on, had a hole the size of a softball in it. The door bowed out at the top and bottom like someone had hit it with a hammer. There was blood everywhere. It covered the wall and spattered like red paint on the floor and ceiling.

There was no bullet, no casing, no explosive residue. There was no gun. Two other kids saw it happen and both said the watch on Rick's wrist exploded like an M-80. No one had heard Jack's side until now but rumors abounded. Frank sat quietly for a moment, his own mind trying to wrap around the idea that this kid was telling the truth but slipping off before it took hold. Jack continued.

"Marcy left school and went to a private school in Evanston. I never talked to her again. I heard Rick went to college but not to the fancy

Ivy league schools everyone thought he would."

"Did you shoot him?"

The question shot out of Frank's mouth before he could stop it. Jack looked at the agent with those hawk's eyes. Frank realized he might have shattered any smooth relationship he had built so far.

"What have I been talking about all of this time? No. I didn't shoot him."

"How did you feel about what you did?" The change in questioning shocked Jack and he spent a moment to think about the question. Jack shifted his eyes back to the mirrored glass.

"I felt sick. I felt sick for weeks. I saw it happen over and over. I hated Rick, that will never change, but I realized I wasn't as mad at what he did but at Marcy for letting him do it.

"But he was just a dumb animal doing what stupid horny animals do and I blew his hand off for it. That wasn't who I was. I didn't want to be like that and the more I realized what I did, the more I hated myself.

"I'm not Superman but I can do something other people can't. I can do something that might help people and the first time I use it for more than a snooze button I almost kill a guy. I was sick for a long time after that day but it helped me think and I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to help people.

"But how? It's not like Spiderman where I can walk down the street and watch a car full of bank robbers drive by. I read a report about nineteen thousand people a year dying in drunk driving accidents but how would I find them? I can't just pick out drunk drivers and stop their cars any more than the police can find them and pull them over.

"I spent a few days hanging around the airport feeling for the threads of bombs in suitcases but there weren't any. I wasn't doing any good there either.

"I thought about turning myself in. Perhaps scientists could figure out how to use me to solve some power crisis. Then I had a dream of myself in a vat of some thick liquid with cables coming out of my eyes driving enough power to light up the east coast all at once and I scrapped that idea. I don't want to be a machine.

"Something I read gave me an idea. I had a teacher who made us read these terrible books where young boys kill themselves all the time but she gave us a book I really liked. It was the Ray Bradbury book Fahrenheit 451. The main character, Guy something"

"Montag."

"Right. His wife just sits around and watches shitty soap operas on three huge TVs. The whole world is like her, with radios and cell-phones stuck in their ears to keep themselves from thinking. I looked

at my father with that stupid cord hanging out of his ear like a booger. He spent more time talking to people he couldn't see than people he could. My sister took her iPod to the dinner table, her head bopping the entire time she's shoveling food into her mouth. My mom never stops watching TV. She has one in the kitchen she watches until 4am some nights. What is that? What are we doing that for? Why bother living together? The only time we had a conversation in the last week was discussing the stressful political situation of American Idol.

"I found something else out around this time. I could pull farther. I could feel the TVs in my neighbor's houses. I could follow a thread of current from a lamp into the wall socket and feel it spread through the house. I could follow it down the street lighting up every house in its own web. I could travel for miles that way. I could see cars as they blasted past with their radios blazing like small suns. I could see a cell phone in someone's pocket like a road flare and then see the path it burns into this huge web that covers the whole town in a giant yellow bubble of the signal. I saw white paths burning up into the sky. I had to pull myself back once in a while to keep from going nuts. It was pretty strange." Jack paused

"Tell me about the mall," said Frank.

"I knew how far I could feel and it seemed to go on forever, but I didn't know how far or how much I could pull. So I went to the mall."

The reports from the mall made little sense to Frank, probably on purpose. The cops didn't have an explanation so they came up with anything to fill in the blanks on the form and forget about it. Now Frank would find out, or at least find out what Jack thought. Whether Frank could accept it was a different story. Right now, however, Frank didn't have any other theory.

"It was easier than I thought. I was in the food court when I wound up the courage to give it a try. I closed my eyes and felt for the threads. They lit up like Christmas, all over the mall. Billions of these tiny little lines spreading in giant columns of power or a cellular paper-thin sheet. Everyone had something; a watch, a cell phone, a pager, a palm pilot. So I grabbed a thin line and began to pull on it like a loose thread on a sweater. The whole place began to unravel. From the food court outward the whole place went dead silent. The air conditioning shut off. I heard fifty people all at once say 'Hello? Hello?'. I gave them five seconds to take their phones away from their faces and then I pushed. Not hard, but just a little bit. I saw white arcs tear through those dying lines and I heard a thousand tiny pops. The air filled with the smell of burning plastic. The lights, the check-out computers, everything smoked. The entire mall was dead quiet, more quiet than I've heard anything in my life. And then the place went nuts."

Nuts didn't really begin to describe it from the reports Frank read. Overall five people died and twenty six had to be hospitalized. A woman shouted something about a nuclear bomb and a riot started. A stampede for the grocery store trampled those unlucky enough to get in the way. It took thirty six officers and six detectives to restore order. They had to come in riot gear.

"Things got crazy when that woman started shouting that the city got nuked." Jack continued, his eyes on the mirrored wall. "I saw these old businessmen just stampeding out of the place leaving young kids standing alone. But then I saw something else.

"There was this large black guy. He looked like a gang banger. He walked over to a woman in an electric wheel chair. She looked horrified at first but he said something to her, only one or two words. She looked relieved and she said 'thank you'. He picked her up and two of his buddies pushed the yuppies away from the door while he took her out.

"That guy was a hero that day. There were others like him too. Some didn't know what to do but a lot of people who never would give each other the time of day helped each other out. I saw a businessman pick up a woman with a twisted ankle and kick his way through a fire exit. I saw two young kids take an older fellow out one of the store exits. I saw people treating others like people again. Fifteen minutes earlier they didn't even see each other."

"I wasn't a hero, but that day I made heroes."

Frank looked at Jack for a long time. He sat calm, his eyes hard and unblinking. His mind, however, raced and roared. He tossed ideas back and forth like a game of championship ping-pong. Logic and reason battled with the unbelievable story he had heard from Jack and read in the reports. His head hurt. He didn't see any other way to go on without something.

Frank stepped out of the small room. He returned less than a minute later and put his pager on the fake wood table. The small rounded black box sat staring up at the ceiling with a single little green eye flashing the time. Frank looked at Jack. He didn't have to tell the boy what he wanted him to do.

"If I prove it to you, I will go to jail."

"You're not leaving here anyway. A team from Washington will be here in an hour. They're going to take you back with them to find out more about this. I'm here to prove we're not wasting their time."

"I'm not David Blane. I don't do sidewalk magic to impress girls."

"What do you think you're going to do next? Will you shut down every electronic device in the country?"

"No. The planet."

"You'd kill hundreds of millions of people," Frank said. "Food would dry up. Water wouldn't flow. The economy would collapse. Children would starve to death. Taking so many lives doesn't sound like a hero to me."

"And what sort of lives would I take? The world would be a better place if people couldn't get fat on MacDonalds watching 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire'. People like my dad would have to learn how to grow enough food to eat instead of what tie goes with what suit. He'd have to actually walk for water instead of doing 20 minutes on his bow flex. Our twisted and warped economy would go back to working hard to survive instead of killing time between episodes of 'Survivor'.

"You remember what happened after nine-eleven? Do you remember the stories of people breaking through walls to rescue people trapped under rubble? Those were heroes. Five minutes before they're getting coffee and sending faxes but five minutes later they saved someone's life. I remember when my dad drove me to school the next day and I saw a guy, he looked like a biker, standing on an overpass holding up

an American flag. The rest of us were off to school or work but he stayed there to remind us that something happened and we were all brothers. Everyone was a lot nicer to one another after that. Everyone helped each other.

"I'm going to make heroes again. I'm going to get rid of business executives and CEOs and Palm Pilots and Tivos. People will have to help each other again."

Frank sat looking at Jack, his eyes projecting none of the chaos that swam in his head. Visions of the future flashed in Frank's mind. He saw himself walking down the street next to the beltway in Virginia. He could hear every machine shut down, every motor dying. He could hear nothing but the crickets and confused people getting out of their cars. A few seconds later he would hear far away explosions as jets full of screaming people smashed into the ground. People in hospitals would die in hours or minutes or seconds. People on ships stuck in the middle of the ocean would starve to death in a few weeks or run out of drinking water even sooner than that.

His mind cleared. There is no way this kid was telling the truth. It was impossible. Let the psycho-technologists from Sandia poke him with pencils all they wanted but he was tired of wasting his time. Frank's anger boiled and his chest tightened. His vision darkened. He looked down at the green-iridescent display on his pager. Fuck this kid and his bullshit story.

"You want to see proof?" Jack's voice was calm.

The tightening got worse. Frank's left arm throbbed like rivers of lead flowed through his veins. His vision closed in and his chest wanted to explode. Frank's knees buckled and he tipped to the right in his chair. He crashed to the floor his chest crushed by a sledge hammer of pain. Through blackening vision he saw Jack stand up and scoop the pager off of the table.

"I'm not going to kill you. I haven't killed anyone and I don't plan to. I could have blown up that squad car that came to pick me up this morning, but I didn't. I could have blown up this building on my way in if I wanted, but I didn't." Frank heard the crackling and sputtering of recording equipment exploding and burning behind the mirrored glass wall. "Most of the equipment in there is gone, but the VCR still works. I want people to know why I'm doing what I'm doing. They may call me an enemy or a terrorist or whatever, but I want them to really know why."

The thin boy walked over to the locked door and balanced the pager between the round steel knob and the jam of the door. There was a loud bang like a pair of M80s and the door swung open. Jack looked down on Frank.

"I guess they shouldn't have sent someone with a pacemaker, huh."

Author's Notes: After seeing Spiderman 2, I had the idea of writing a superhero tale using the same set as My Dinner with Andre. I wanted a superhero story told in a room between two normal people. If done as a play, the play could be done with a table and two actors. The entire story would be the dialog between them. What I didn't count on was Jack's anti-hero quality. He's not exactly a good kid, and his plan is pretty dangerous.

Vrenna and the Red Stone

Hot sand ripped across the city of Gazu Kuul. It beat against the hardened stone and clay buildings as it had for nearly five thousand years. Every morning, just after daybreak, the sands would carve off another layer of the life within Gazu Kuul. Only those with thick skin, hardened narrow eyes, and the instincts of the desert survived in this place.

Alzen's dark eyes stared intently at the flat rooftops of the market, watching the deadly clouds of sand pour over them like dry rain. He exposed only his eyes, covering his mouth and nose with faded gray cloth and his head in a white wrap. A tattered robe covered his lean brown body. A strip of tied cloth kept the robe closed. He spent his whole life in this city, thirteen hard years. Every day since he was three years old, Alzen started the day the same way. He watched the sands tear across the city and he prepared.

Most merchants and beggars waited until the burning orb of the sun broke through the morning sandstorm, signaling the end of the tearing wind. Alzen knew a trick. He watched until the orbs of the towers shone through the beating red clouds. When he saw those black, gold, and silver tapered bulbs towering over the torn and beaten hovels of most of Gazu Kuul's Alouthoga, a word that meant both citizen and slave in the desert tongue, lived, Alzen knew that the storm began to break. In three more minutes most of Gazu Kuul's people would flood the market buying, selling, begging, and stealing nearly everything they could.

He thought about his day as he watched the rooftops and when the

ominous bulbs of the towers stood in the shadows of the storm he did what he did every morning. He ran.

By the time the sun fully cut through the dust, the bazaar burst open with people. The cries and shouts filled the hot air. Everywhere the smell of sweat and animal feaces saturated the city. Dark-skinned bodies, now stripped of their protective robes, pressed together and shouted at one another over the price of wheat or melons or women.

Alzen pushed his hand out to every passer-by who might have a coin. Two hours in the blistering sun had given him only two coppers, hardly enough to pay for his own food this day, not to mention the rest of his family. If he didn't have seven by high sun, he would have to steal it. Stealing was dangerous. His older brother lost his left hand stealing from an ox merchant. Alzen came close to losing his own once or twice if it hadn't been for a well placed kick to the groin.

Alzen's morbid thoughts broke up in his head when he saw the crowd break open in the narrow street. He heard voices quiet and the haggling ceased. Two huge men towered over the crowd, shoving those few who did not see the procession. Their massive size and dark hairless bodies stood in stark contrast to the thin half-starved bodies around them. The two men stood pushed open a clearing within the sea of people. Another huge man wearing an iron helm and mask walked behind them. He held chains leading to the iron collars of three young slave girls. Not one of them was older than sixteen. They wore thin veils over their smooth faces and small bands of cloth around their breasts and waists that did more to expose their young ivory skin than to cover it.

A smaller man walked in the center of the procession carrying a large sunshade made from huge bird feathers. From under this shade, at the center of the bubble that broke the unruly bazaar apart, walked Zeeva the Flame.

A silver tiara held her flowing red hair back from her smooth creamy face. Her large breasts threatened to burst forth from her black and red jeweled corset. The straps of her black silk sandals snaked around her long smooth legs halfway up her bare thighs. She wore only a tiny undergarment around her waist, cutting deep between her buttocks and barely covering her most private of places. Hanging from a leather cord around her neck, settling comfortably between her full breasts, sat the Eye of Gzaara, a sphere of swirling oranges and reds set in a cup of gold. It burned like a small sun.

The second Alzen saw the woman he backed as far into the crowd as he could. There would be no handouts from her. Though she had just returned from the slave market and the slightest of smiles touched her full blood-red lips, Alzen knew that no mercy would be found here. His brother made that mistake once. Zeeva's bodyguard, the one in the iron mask, cut off his brother's hand with three strokes of a cleaver while Alzen's mother screamed in horror. Zeeva smiled then too.

Dark bodies pressed themselves away from the woman and her entourage. The red-haired woman, her guards, and her newly purchased slave girls, their eyes wide in fear for the future, continued their walk to Zeeva's tower. All crushed themselves out of the way. All but one.

She was cloaked in gray and wore tall leather boots ending halfway up her thighs. A jeweled sword hung low on her left hip. The hood of her cloak covered her head from the morning sun. While everyone else scrambled out of the way, this mysterious raven haired woman held her ground.

Zeeva stopped and her green eyes blazed with anger.

"Move away, desert whore!"

One of the huge bodyguards shoved the cloaked woman aside and into the crowd. She fell back against the dark bodies of the marketplace and the procession moved on.

As the menacing group passed, business returned to normal. The roar of the bazaar rose again. The bustle of merchants and beggars pumped back into life. Alzen saw the pale blue eyes of the cloaked woman. Her eyes followed Zeeva and her huge guards all the way down the street towards her tower. The rest of the merchants and beggars forgot about the passing of Zeeva the Flame. Alzen saw very clearly that the cloaked woman had not.

Alzen thought not of the woman or of Zeeva until much later that evening. Alzen's feet ached and his skin still burned from the day's hot sun. He had earned what he needed for the day. Now he slipped from shadow to shadow on his way home.

Thieves and ruffians owned the streets at night. Twice Alzen had to change his path home to avoid gangs of thugs that hunted like wild beasts. He found himself in the alleys of the higher people and their ornate dwellings. Alzen made special care to remain hidden in the streets of the rich. The private guards hired to patrol here were quick to label anyone a thief and slit open a throat before any plea may be heard. In many ways, the guards were worse than the gangs.

Alzen ducked back behind a pair of wooden crates when three men armored in chain and wearing masks of metal walked past. When they moved on, Alzen realized where he stood. His eyes traveled up above the two-story houses on this street to the tower of the Flame that stood only two blocks away.

Seven towers marked Gazu Kuul to the lands around it. Legend spoke of a king who had the towers built for each of his favorite wives. Now two of these towers belonged to Gazu Kuul's current lord, a brutal and lazy man known by very few. He cared little for the city and let the rich rule their own lands while paying for his extravagant lifestyle and his taste for small virgin males. The richest of Gazu Kuul's citizens owned the other five towers.

Each tower stood nearly two hundred feet tall and the top floor of each was a ball of stone tapering to a point at the roof. While most of the seven towers were plated in gold or silver, this one was plated in onyx. The tower of the Flame stood black as pitch against the dark sky. Only a burning red circle on the bulb of the top floor marked it from the darkness surrounding it. Red fire illuminated a window on the top floor and black smoke billowed out into the night. Zeeva the Flame owned this tower and when he thought of what dark horrors lurked in that tower cold bumps covered Alzen's brown flesh.

A scream cut into the silent night coming from that window and Alzen nearly turned to flee until something else caught his eye. Something moved on the surface of the tower. Alzen squinted his eyes and the shape became clearer. It was a figure scaling the walls of the tower like a spider. Patches of ivory skin shown at the thighs, buttocks, back, and shoulders of the figure. Black leather gloves and boots sought holds in the smooth walls. The figure turned and Alzen caught a

glimpse of the woman's pale blue eyes in the dim light. It was the woman from the street! She had shed her cloak leaving very little clothing left, tied her jeweled sword to her back, and now climbed Zeeva's tower.

Alzen stared with his mouth agape. Never in his life had he ever wanted to go near that tower and now he watched a woman scaling its walls to break in! He watched her smooth lithe body as it climbed with amazing speed. He watched her long legs swing into the round window burning red with unholy light. He saw the woman disappear into the tower and again resisted the urge to run when another scream, this one of frustration and anger, cut across the night air.

Power flowed through Zeeva. She felt it streaming through her veins. She felt the heat of the stone between her bare breasts. Warmth flowed over her naked skin as dark words of an ancient tongue left her full red lips. She spoke the tongue of the Old Empire now dead for nearly fifteen centuries. At the end of each long, spiteful sentence, her arm pumped and her whip cracked.

The three headed whip in her hand cracked down on the naked slave girl in front of her. Lines of a dozen such lashings criss crossed the young girl's back and buttocks. The girl, her hands and feet bound, cried out and twisted under the beating. The young girl feverishly kissed Zeeva's feet, tears streaming from her eyes. The two other slave girls watched with wide terrified eyes. Their binds held them naked to the stone walls, the chains held by the stone arms of huge demonic statues. A brazier burned with a deep orange flame as black smoke billowed to the ceiling of the room and out into the night air. The deep orange light twisted the grimacing faces of the stone beasts lining the walls.

Zeeva stood naked except for an ornately stitched silk cloth belted around her waist with a gold rope. A band of red paint spread across Zeeva's eyes. Her hair hung unbound down her back and shoulders. She read from a large leatherbound tome laying open on a stone pedestal. Diagrams and instructions of horrible mutilations and prayers to dark and ancient gods burned black on the yellowing pages.

Zeeva closed her eyes and began chanting another dark verse. The naked girl in front of her continued kissing and licking her mistress's feet. The smoke of fire intoxicated her. She felt drunk on the strange thick concoction she drank at the beginning of her dark rite. Visions of worlds beyond imagination filled her swimming head. She saw a sun of huge blue fire setting over a world of molten metal and black rock. She saw horrors of twisted claws and thick leathery tentacles. She saw burning yellow eyes.

Coldness fell over her like a bucket of water and the visions broke apart. Her breath stole out of her lungs. Confusion shattered her trance. She placed a hand between her breasts, feeling for the red stone. It was gone.

Zeeva wheeled around and the piercing stare of twin blue eyes sent her rocking back on her bare heels. The whore from the market stood right behind her. The red stone, eye of Flame, dangled from a severed leather tie in the woman's left hand. A saber of gemmed gold and steel

hung loosely in the woman's right hand. Before Zeeva could catch her balance the woman shoved her hard. Zeeva stumbled backwards and over the naked slave girl laying curled at her feet. She fell hard, her bare behind smacking hard on the stone floor.

The woman with the blazing blue eyes smiled down at Zeeva. She stood on long legs clad in high leather boots. Zeeva started to stand when a flash of steel slashed across, threatening to cut open her eyes should she attempt to get to her feet. Zeeva fell back, again, her face flush with rage and humiliation.

The woman raced across the room like a cat. In a flash she disappeared down the room's only exit, a spiral staircase to the floors below.

Voroth was just beginning to wonder why the slave girl's cries had ceased when he saw the leather clad thief race down the spiral staircase. The furious cry of his mistress followed, echoing like steel scratching slate throughout the tower. Voroth shouted for the two closest guards to stop the woman. They reached for her but both fell away crying out in pain. One clutched a deep gash along the inside of his wrist His thick fingers hung limp on severed tendons while blood gushed from the gaping wound. The other fell to the stone stairs howling in pain and grabbing at the back of his knee. An deep wound in the back of the man's leg opened to the bone.

Voroth rushed at the little woman and ducked just as her jeweled blade cut out at his throat. No mere novice to battle, Voroth punched hard and fast. His fist smashed into the woman's chest and he felt the woman's breath explode out her mouth.

Voroth heard a clink and saw Zeeva's necklace rolling down the staircase. He heard his mistress shriek again and looked up to see Zeeva half naked, gesturing, and crying madly for her the falling gemstone.

Voroth dove and grabbed the necklace just before it fell over the edge likely shattering on the floor over one hundred and fifty feet below. He grabbed it firmly inside his huge hands and turned to shout his success when a hard boot heel smashed in his nose.

Small leather-gloved fingers plucked the gem from Voroth's grasp as blood sprayed down his face. Through glazed watery eyes, Voroth saw the lithe thief turn towards his mistress at the top of the stairs. The rogue held up the stone and dangled it from its leather string.

"Payment for your insult."

Voroth tried to grab the woman's ankle as she fled past and down the stairs but another kick to his ruined nose flooded him in agony. All he could do was watch as the rogue raced down the steps and out into the night.

Alzen sat unmoving in the alley. His eyes never left the burning red window far above the ground where the strange woman had disappeared. Screams of rage, crashes of stone, and the deep roars of men flowed out through the cracks of stone in the tower. Alzen knew he should run but he could not.

Less than two minutes after the woman had disappeared the front door of the tower burst open and the woman rushed out. One of her eyes was dark and swollen but her other blue eye blazed. She ran down the road pursued by three larger dark men wearing loincloths and brandishing wicked spears but they could not catch her. The largest of these men held a hand to his ruined face. Alzen crouched as she ran by but she saw him anyway. He could see the smile on her lips and he winked at her. In her hand, the red gem of the witch queen shined in the moonlight.

In all his days, Alzen had never seen one as powerful as Zeeva bested by anyone. He would never have considered it possible. But this woman had shown him the possibility. This woman's theft of a witches gem planted a seed in the young boy, a seed that would grow for years making him stronger and smarter. It was a seed that would one day sprout into revolution.

Author's Notes: Vrenna and the Red Stone was my second Vrenna story and the second one that is more character introduction than full story. This is the first Vrenna story that takes place in the southern deserts although I hadn't fleshed out the desert enough to give the city a place name. Zeeva is a fun character and I love her witchy ways. This story was definitely influenced by Robert Howard's Conan novels in my unapologetic gratuitous use of sex, torture, and violence.

This story was also my first attempt to tell an entire story outside the perspective of the main character. I don't think that idea worked very well and I abandoned it with Vrenna and the White. The idea was to keep Vrenna, her backround, and her motivations completely separate. Someone had to tell the story, however, and thus the beggar boy, Zeeva, and Zeeva's captain were born. A lot of people complained that all Alzen does is watch her. That was his purpose.

I have a sequel to this story planned with Zeeva seeking the return of her stone and revenge for the theft.

Mad Cow

Dave crossed the street without looking both ways. He didn't have to. Occasionally he heard an engine roar over the smoggy air but he hadn't seen a working car in almost a month. Most of the few people left in London didn't remember what a car looked like much less how to drive one. They saw the large London cabs that sat like dead black hippos in the road, but they didn't have the words in their head to describe them anymore.

Six months earlier the streets were as busy as always. The cabs swam along the lines between two lanes in the seas of cars. Packs of commuters flowed up and down the sidewalks. Attractive women in smart suits pushed their long black hair over their shoulders. Retro-punks with foot-tall mohawks of green and purple sneered at anyone who made eye contact. Few did. Life in London changed little from the turn of the millennium until 2020. People worked. People lived. Everyone talked on a cell phone.

Six months ago there were nine million people in London Now less than five thousand still lived. It wasn't war or terrorism or a collapsed economy that destroyed the world. It was cows.

Dave gazed up at the black smoke pouring out of the windows of St. Pauls Cathedral. Everything south of the Themes burned a month earlier but this looked more like a camp fire. It was cold this October. Dave imagined a few people died each night, people not smart enough any more to start their own fire.

Dave's stomach growled. He hadn't eaten in two days. His canned food ran out a week or so ago. He shot a dog the day after and that kept them fed for another two days. Yesterday Janet began to cry and didn't stop throughout the night. This morning Dave knew he would have to go find some food no matter how dangerous it was outside. They would both die in their small flat cold and starving. Getting stabbed or beaten to death by a rape gang for the meat on his bones didn't sound so bad. He loved Janet and he couldn't stand hearing her cry like that.

There wasn't much food left in London. When the first reports hit, the numbers were low. The same people who bought strapping tape and sheets of plastic bought record amounts of vegetarian canned meals. Most everyone else waved their hands and kept on with their lives. The numbers got bigger. Almost everyone gave up red meat even though it wasn't yesterday's hamburger that killed you, it was the one you ate 20 years earlier.

That's when food hoarding became a real problem. The government slaughtered cattle with almost hate-filled efficiency. The government sated people's thirst for blood by declaring a war on cows in everything but name.

They regretted it a month later when massive food shortages led to riots with thousands dead. Feed corn became the first solution. The same blood crazy people who demanded the execution of the perfectly

healthy cows for the plague of their ancestors ended up eating the same food the cows ate. The feed didn't last long either but this time the food riots didn't last. Two months after the first outbreaks of Mad Cow Disease the deaths went from hundreds to hundreds of thousands to millions. Few were left to riot.

Dave looked up and saw the bluest sky he ever saw. Not a single cloud marred its surface. He breathed in a lung full of fresh clean air and the sounds of birds and the river danced in his ears. A broken water main spilled water in a twenty foot waterfall from a burned out building to a pool below. Green ivy climbed up the red brick building. A chilled October breeze blew back his uncut hair. He couldn't remember such a beautiful day. Thoughts of Janet sunk in his chest. Perhaps he would take her outside to enjoy what might be her last beautiful day.

The stab of hunger in his stomach reminded him of his purpose. He would take her outside after he found some food.

Dave hadn't worried when the first reports came in. For twenty years the media fed off of the fear of the people. How many times can one cry wolf before people stop listening? Hundreds died and thousands more were diagnosed with the disease.

The symptoms started out as mild alzheimer's and grew steadily worse. Extreme cases died in days. Others took months; agonizing months. People died in pain. It ripped their mind open and their brain sent spasms so severe that muscles tore and bones cracked. It wasn't the reports or the numbers that frightened Dave, it was the clinics.

The first death clinic opened up three months after the first outbreak. Dave expected the police or religious groups to tear the walls down. Instead it opened to a crowd of a thousand people, not protesters but customers.

The clinics ran day and night. The smoke of the built-in crematoriums billowed black smoke into the air constantly. Priests worked in shifts. Parliament passed no laws and the Catholic Church made no statements since the day the pope died after screaming for five days straight until his throat ripped itself apart.

The lines of people leading into a small building with a column of black smoke pouring from its stack frightened Dave more than anything else.

Somewhere far away something exploded and brought Dave's mind to the present. Two overturned trucks and a pile of metal formed a

barricade in the middle of the road. Somewhere far away someone played The Who's "Join Together" over a stadium-sized system. Dave was surprised anyone was left to operate it.

Dave walked around the barricade trying his best to keep silent. What he saw on the other side made his empty stomach retch.

Blood painted the side of one of the trucks. A pile of bones, skulls, and festering rotting organs sat in a pile. The smell pushed away any thoughts of food. The white skulls, the tops crushed in, grinned at Dave. They knew what trap Dave fell into and soon his gleaming grinning skull would sit next to theirs.

The disease hit everyone differently. Some exhibited severe forms of parkinson's, others severe forms of alzheimer's. It attacked the brain and nervous system, triggering all kinds of chemical releases. Most wasted away or died horribly as their system poisoned them and shut down their organs. Others went crazy or lost all memory and died of starvation. Dave imagined later that the disease triggered massive amounts of testosterone and adrenaline, the biological version of PCP, in the man who attacked him. At the time, however, he only saw a monster.

The man that climbed out of the overturned trailer must have been seven feet tall and well over three hundred pounds. His had no hair and one of his arms was twisted and dangling half way up his left forearm. Thick muscles covered his massive frame. He was completely naked. His tiny penis sat withered and useless between his thick legs.

He held a baseball bat in his right hand. Dried blood painted it from the splintered tip to the handle wrapped with white tape. A thick river of blood ran down the huge man from the bottom of his mouth, down his chest to his crotch. One of his eyes focused on Dave. The other, milky white, rolled aimlessly. He opened his mouth in a wide grin of rotting and blood-filled teeth.

The fourth month after the breakout of the disease, after the government quit pretending to address the problem the gangs ran the streets. Like packs of wild dogs, they roamed from door to door killing men, raping women, and stealing any food or weapons they found. They ripped through blocks of flats like leather-wrapped fire. Dave heard that one of these gangs bragged about killing a thousand people in one night. As month four turned into month five, they added cannibalism to their resume.

Dave's flat neighbor, Larry the cop, showed Dave and Janet his .357 revolver and a double barreled shotgun at dinner one evening. He remembered thinking about turning in Larry to the bobbys but something told him not to. It saved his life a year later. When Dave heard about the gangs he knocked on Larry's door. When Larry didn't answer, Dave broke the door in hoping he wouldn't eat a chest full of buck shot.

Instead he breathed in the smells of feces and decaying flesh. Larry's decaying corpse sat in his easy chair. The shotgun sat propped up on the wall by the door. The pistol was in his lap on top of an issue of ?Oui?. The buxom seductress on the cover pouted and pushed her breast together. Dave was pretty sure there wasn't a woman alive with breasts like that anymore.

Dave didn't have to fight off gangs of cannibal rapists. No roaring skinhead kicked in their flat door. Dave only used the pistol one time to shoot a wandering dog for food. He fumbled with the rubber contoured grip of the steel revolver stuck in his waist band. He was lucky he didn't blow his dick off, he thought later. He raised the gun and aimed it at the beast who approached him. The ogre-man grinned a stupid grin and raised the bat high over his head.

He jerked the trigger and the pistol kicked hard in his hands. He missed by a mile. When he opened his eyes the huge man still came on. Dave could smell the mix of rot from the man's breath and saw patches of hair and skin stuck on the bloody bat. The huge man's broken arm dangled back and fourth.

Dave aimed the pistol again, let out a deep breath, and squeezed the trigger. The gun went off by itself this time. Hot blood gushed over Dave's face. He thought it was his own streaming out from his newly cracked skull but when he opened his eyes he saw the jagged hole spraying blood where the man's face had been. The man crashed backwards into his pile of skulls, bones, and decaying meat. His body convulsed as blood poured out from the back of his head into an expanding dark red pool.

Dave wanted to run away. Adrenaline rushed through his body. He breathed hard even though he did nothing but pull a trigger. He felt like he just sprinted for a mile. He stumbled back and retched but he had no food to throw up. He spat on the ground and closed his eyes until his nausea passed. He wiped a hand across his face and retched again when it came back soaked in blood.

Something kept him there. Perhaps Dave had developed a sixth sense for finding food. The rusted hole in the overturned truck beckoned to him.

Dave climbed up the twisted steel trailer that lay like a wounded beast. He tried to peek inside but shadows covered anything within. Dave couldn't imagine it was any worse inside the trailer than it was outside. He turned onto his stomach, dangled his legs over the edge and dropped inside.

He panicked as his feet hit the floor. He looked up and saw the hole he fell through was almost nine feet up. He wouldn't be strong enough to lift himself out without help and the help had all died. The vision of starving to death stuck in this hot stinking trailer flashed through his mind along with another shot of adrenaline. He forced himself to calm down and look around.

The smell of rotten meat filled the hot air within the trailer. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. Dave recoiled in horror at the stacks and stacks of shining skulls. He saw hundreds of them piled into neat rows and wrapped in plastic. The light got better and his eyes adjusted. It wasn't skulls he saw.

It was cans of food.

Rows and rows of cans sat on wooden pallets wrapped in plastic. A few sat busted on the floor like giant fat bugs crushed by a boot. Each can had a self-opening pull top lid, like a large beer tab, but the ogre outside apparently couldn't figure them out and settled for crushing people's heads and eating them instead.

Dave tore open the plastic and saw fifty cans of beef and vegetable soup. Another stack of chicken noodle soup sat underneath. He did some quick math in his head and counted forty stacks of fifty cans. If he and Janet ate two a day they could live two years before needing more food.

Dave tore open the top of an alphabet soup can and drank it down in four thick gulps. It tasted better than anything he ever ate. When his ravenous hunger subsided the logistical problems presented themselves. The crates would help him get out of the trailer, so the image of dying in this box left him. Dave dragged four crates under the hole in the trailer's roof and he easily climbed out the hole. He went back in and began filling his backpack full of the soup cans. He managed to stuff thirty cans of beef and vegetable soup in his

backpack. The beef and vegetable soup had the highest calorie count of any of the cans he found. The pack weighed over twenty pounds now. His back lanced with pain when he shouldered it. He climbed up the crates and scrambled out of the stagnant air of the trailer.

Dave imagined a dozen men, tattooed, no shirts, and wielding axes, knives, and blood-spattered hammers waiting for him. His backpack carried priceless cargo, perhaps the only valuable substance left on earth. Honorable men would slit his throat and leave him sucking lungs full of his own blood for those thirty cans. When his eyes adjusted to the daylight he saw no such mob waiting for him. Dave replaced the two spent shells in his pistol before beginning the walk home.

He needn't have worried. Besides himself, Janet, and the now-dead ogre, no one within ten kilometers of this area woke up this morning. He saw no one but a pack of wild dogs. He let them be and they let him be. They were just two packs of scavengers sucking what meat they could from the dead of this world.

Dave stepped over the piles of boxes, electronics, appliances, and mattresses that blocked the stairwell to his apartment. He opened the door to his home. Heat rushed out and he cursed himself for not opening any windows. The apartment got hot in the afternoons whatever month it was.

Dave went into the bedroom and his heart broke when he looked at Janet. At first he thought his wife had died but when her chest moved up and down he let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He kissed her yellowed skin and felt heat coming off of her. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. He kissed her again.

Dave went back to the kitchen and found a spoon. He went back to the bed and helped Susan sit upright. He popped open a can of soup and inhaled the incredible smell. He fed her two cans and she kept both of them down.

Susan and Dave married five years before the outbreak. On their honeymoon they went to Cozumel and spent two weeks making love, reading trashy novels, and watching the sun set. One evening they sat on their wooden porch of their bungalow and sat silently for two hours under the deep blue sky. They watched the sun fall below the sea and listened to the waves crash on the shore.

Dave grabbed a blanket and two pillows and stuck them in the arms of

his pack before slinging it over his right shoulder. He lifted Susan out of bed and into his arms. She was as light as a child. He grabbed two jugs of water from the kitchen and climbed four flights of stairs to the roof of their flat. The city lay below them sprawling out to the horizon with columns of black smoke rising into the deep blue sky.

Dave propped up the pillows on the brick wall of the stairwell. He dropped the backpack full of food and the two jugs of water on the gravel roof. Dave sat with Susan in his arms wrapped in a blanket and watched the sun set over a dead world.

Author's Notes: I grabbed the seed of Mad Cow during a lunchtime conversation with a coworker who said that the real danger of Mad Cow is that it lays dormant for twenty years before it kicks in. He mentioned the human euthanasia clinics and boom, I had a story. I submitted this to Strange Horizons who sent it back saying the science was lacking. That never seemed to stop Bradbury, though this is no Bradbury by any means.

Loyalty

Devlin Charlson looked up at the Tower of the Eye and wondered if its agents already watched him. His nerves tightened with each of his horse's clopping steps. The Tower of the Eye sat in black contrast against the gray sky on the south west hill overlooking the city of Greenhorn.

All around him, the city bustled with life. An ornate carriage carried royal aristocrats from one massive palace to another. Merchants and beggars cried out and hustled one another for chickens and cords of wood. A small troop of the emperor's guard marched by in shining steel breastplates, three-cornered hats, tall polearms, and long barreled muskets strapped to their backs. All of this faded into a gray dull cloud. Only the Tower stood in his senses.

Two weeks earlier he had stood on a dead hill, blood splashed across his armor and dripping down his saber. His pistol smoked in his hand. Below him the bodies of two thousand dead Voth barbarians lay rotting under the smoke-filled sky. Ten thousand musket-armed soldiers of Faigon's Sword had cut the Voth to pieces.

A week later in the army's camp, the blood of his own men stained his hands. He sat in the tent of his commander and the commander's adviser, a small pale man with deep lines cutting across his cheeks, pushing his mouth into a permanent frown. Unlike the commander

and his soldiers, dressed in boiled leather breastplates, leather three-cornered hats, and black cloaks, the agent of the Eye wore only a gray tunic, brown trousers, and a hood that covered his bald head. The adviser was an agent of the Eye. Every commander had been assigned one and it was this adviser that had sent Devlin north to Greenhorn to meet with an investigator in the Tower.

Devlin looked back up to the Tower of the Eye. It stood nearly three hundred feet high and looked even higher sitting on the hill next to the ornate royal palace. Its surface was the color of slate. Unlike the Emperor's palace, it lacked any decoration and had only a handful of narrow windows. The tower was old, built when the first trade ships took port along the wide bend in the Greenbloom River that cut through the northern mountains of Athuel down towards the eastern shores.

The stories of the Tower and the Eye were as old as the Tower itself. Every soldier had a tale to tell. Some spoke of siblings taken to the Tower's depths and never seen again. Others spoke of friends returning from investigations simple minded and slow witted. The stories were quickly hushed, however. It was dangerous to speak in such ways about telepaths.

The stories would not leave him now, however. They had not left him since he left the front lines. He imagined dark cloaked agents of the Eye, their arms buried in the sleeves of their robes, tearing into his every thought, every memory, and every dream with telepathic razors. He envisioned himself naked on a stone floor covered in his own vomit as they fed nightmare after nightmare into his skull. They could bury him in one of the Tower's deep cellars for fifty years and no one would ever ask for him. No one would ever mention his name again.

Devlin approached the Tower's horse rail. He swung one leg over and dropped to the ground in a fast and well-practiced dismount. His hands fell instinctively to the twin flintlock pistols hanging low on his hips from his well oiled four buckle gun belt. His fingers brushed over the hilt of his gold-pommeled saber before reaching up and taking off his own brown leather three-cornered hat.

Two guards flanked the steel reinforced oak doors of the Tower. Fine steel breastplates shined in the afternoon sun. Each guard held a black-barreled blunderbuss far bigger than Devlin had ever seen.

Devlin handed the larger of the two guards a folded parchment. The adviser had given it to Devlin before sending him north. The guard

broke the seal, read the parchment, and looked hard at Devlin. For a moment Devlin imagined the guard swinging his shining black blunderbuss towards him and ripping off all of Devlin's skin in an explosion of fire and lead shot. The big guard smiled and swung open the massive door. Devlin stepped inside.

The main hall of the tower stretched fifty feet across and nearly two hundred feet high. Dim light flowed in from narrow high windows. A spiral staircase snaked around the edge of the hall to each of the fifteen floors above. Feeling a cold sweat on the back of his neck, Devlin approached the huge room's only furnishings, a large oak desk manned by a small man with steel-rimmed spectacles.

"You're two days late." The small man looked at Devlin over his spectacles with green sharp eyes. Devlin got the feeling that his mind was already being probed. Was even the receptionist a telepath? "We expected you earlier."

"A storm caught me in Vandersmare. It didn't break for two nights."

"You must leave your guns and sword here." The old man kept his eyes on Devlin. A huge guard, the mirror image of the guards outside, stood by the door Devlin had entered. Devlin was very conscious of the man's eyes on the back of his head and the huge gun in the man's hands. Devlin unbuckled the two main buckles of his belt and dropped his two guns and his saber on the desk. He felt naked and vulnerable. The guns hadn't left his side for nearly two years.

"Come with me."

The small man led Devlin up the staircase to the second floor of the Tower. Dozens of doors lined the walls of the second-floor walkway. The small man went to one of the doors, knocked twice, opened the door, and beckoned Devlin inside. When Devlin stepped in, the spectacled man closed the door behind him.

An old man sat behind a large oak desk carefully penning words into a hardbound book with a steel quill. His head was shaved bare and red blotches stood out against his pale skin. Deep black skin sagged under sharp eyes. He looked up at Devlin with sharp eyes that would have spoken of youth except for the rest of his appearance. The knot in Devlin's stomach tightened.

"Welcome, lieutenant. I am glad you arrived safely." The man's voice was a calm and melodic voice. "My name is Avalon Gasterson, second circle investigator of the Eye" Devlin nodded and felt his hands sweat.

Avalon paused.

"I understand you are worried about our meeting but I assure you it will be short and easy. If you have nothing to hide, we have little to discuss and you can be on your way."

The man's words struck home with Devlin. In an hour he might be back on the road headed south to the army of the Sword. The camp was a great comfort compared to this place. The front lines drew no nervous strings through Devlin's veins but here Devlin felt like insects crawled in his skin.

"Are you ready to begin?"

Devlin swallowed.

"Yes."

Avalon smiled before closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Devlin felt an itch on the back of his left hand but he did not scratch it.

"You fought in the Sword for ten years."

"Yes."

"You fought under Commander Kalvon Ramsin on the southern front against the Voths?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever acted in violence against the Emperor or his forces?"

Devlin felt a chill flow up his arms. He had broken the arm of a fellow soldier in a fistfight when he was nineteen and the nose of one of his own men when he caught him raping a young girl against orders. His mind spun in a spiral. Is this what they want to hear? Were those actions against the Emperor's direction? What would they do to him if he lied? What would they do if he told the truth? Devlin came to a decision.

"No."

Avalon smiled at him. A dull pain thudded behind Devlin's left eye.

"Have you ever plotted against the Emperor or his plans?"

Again Devlin's mind whirled. He had violated regulations hundreds of

times. Every soldier had. Violating regulations was often the only way to operate without getting yourself or your men killed. The hypocrisy of the question twisted in Devlin's thoughts. He felt nauseous.

"No."

Again Devlin saw Avalon smile. The bald man placed his elbows on the desk and pressed his fingertips together. He peered around his hands at Devlin. Devlin felt the blood rush out of his face.

"On the wheel's night in March, you were ordered to capture a Voth witch. You were given command of twenty men and only returned with six. What happened?"

Devlin felt as though a force pushed his temples together. His eyes felt too big for their sockets. His heart boomed in his chest squeezing thick blood into his brain. Flashes of his battles with the Voths raced through his mind faster than he could recognize them.

"It was dawn the day after the last day of the battle of Gathenvarn. We broke the Voth's main army in two. Rumors whispered that a Voth witch had fueled the remaining Voth raiders with strange powers. Her hut was supposed to be nearby and my first lieutenant gave me twenty musketeers and an order to find her. We combed the hills of three villages for a week hoping to find her.

"We did."

Wind whipped at Devlin's wool cloak. He stood on a rock overlook, the heels of his tall leather boots firmly planted on the edge of the rock. Below him, in a grove of dead trees and brown grass, stood a single round building of wood and clay. Black animal skins covered the door. Strange runes carved into the wooden frame sent a shiver through Devlin's skin as his eye followed their alien script. Splashes of crimson and black colored the clay and wooden walls of the round hut.

Devlin took off his leather three-cornered hat and ran a hand through his unwashed hair and down his pony tail. Patches of blood still stained his thick leather tunic from yesterday's battles. He reset his hat on his head and dropped his hands to the butts of his two flintlock pistols hanging low on his hips. He ran his thumbs over the rough edges of the wings of the two chrome eagles that served as the pistols' hammers. His hand then grazed over the jeweled hilt of his saber hanging low under his left gun. He reached up and tightened his thick leather collar protecting his vulnerable neck; a deep scratch in the collar matched perfectly to a scar on Devlin's cheek.

He spent nearly a minute staring at the hut and the woods around it before speaking.

"First musketeer Aerus."

"Yes sir!" From behind Devlin a young yet battle-worn soldier stood to attention. He held a long musket in his dirty blood-stained hands aiming at the sky.

"Move your men to that clearing twenty yards from the hut. Form two rows and watch the door."

Men stepped out of the woods behind Devlin. They half walked, half slid down the rock overlook to the clearing below. As each man slid down, another covered him with a musket aimed at the hut and the woods around them.

Devlin never moved his eye from the doorway of the sinister structure. He felt his heart sink and his stomach turn as though he swallowed a handful of hot pebbles. What horrors would he find in that hut? What sorcery might burn or tear apart his men? Devlin didn't believe in magic or witchcraft, but whispers spoke of sacrifices and tortures beyond imagination. The Voths swore by their old and dark gods and the witches who spoke for them. These witches had thousands of

unarmed Voth rushing ten thousand musketeers rather than surrender. Anything could be behind that skinned doorway.

When the two lines were in position Devlin slid down the overlook using exposed roots for stability. Soon his hard boot heels planted on the ground below and he stood next to the rows of men.

The two lines of musketeers faced the doorway, ten kneeling in front and ten standing behind. Their muskets formed a wall of firepower; every barrel aimed towards the doorway of the dark hut. Devlin spoke the words he rehearsed in his head for nearly a day.

"Witch of the dead wood! In the name of the Emperor come fourth now or we will rip apart your foul den with lead and fire."

No creature dared to make a sound. Devlin felt his heart hammering in his chest. He imagined demons pouring out of the hut's doorway on thick hairy limbs and black leathered wings. He imagined columns of fire enveloping his men and himself. Yet all was quiet.

"Hammers back, First Musketeer."

Aerus shouted the command. The twenty musketeers drew back the heavy flintlocks of their long muskets. Devlin heard the satisfying sound of twenty smooth-bore muskets cock back in unison. It was a reassuring sound of superiority, the superiority that had given Faigon the victory over the powerful and vast Voth Empire. The next moment, that confidence fell out of him like a cold sheet of water.

They appeared out of the woods like ghosts. They were half naked and huge with rippling muscles covered in dark red runes like those around the doorway. Self inflicted wounds dripped blood down their faces and chests. They were Voth but the burning look in their eyes spoke of something else, something dragged from the depths of hell and poured into their thick veins. The one in front of the other three must have been seven feet tall. He carried an axe that must have weighed seventy pounds.

The first huge Voth raised his axe and roared at the clouded sky. Faster than his mind had registered the motion, Devlin drew and pulled back the eagle hammers of both of his pistols. The twin eagles screeched back to the sky preparing to crash their beaks down into the powder caps of the guns. Devlin didn't fire with his men, however, and holding back saved his life.

Something kept his fingers from squeezing both triggers as hard as he

could, giving the two eagles the one thing they wanted to do most in life, the one thing they were born to do. Instead he held his guns ready as the roar of twenty muskets fired simultaneously pressed in on his ears and stole all other sound away. He realized later that he didn't fire because the other three Voths didn't move at all. They didn't move when the first huge Voth charged and they didn't move as twenty lead balls ripped him apart.

Devlin saw the lead Voth's head and chest burst open. A cloud of blood and smoke obscured the view. The huge man fell in a heap of crushed bone, ripped muscle, and tattered flesh. His huge axe fell to the wet ground with a deep thud. Then, before the musketeers could reload, the other three charged.

Their strategy worked nearly perfectly. The musketeers needed thirty seconds to reload and in their haste they hadn't bothered to bayonet their guns. Two of the Voth berserkers tore into the lines like two scythe blades through grass. In two strokes of their own huge axes they had beheaded four men. Two more strokes and half of Devlin's men lay dead. Those remaining managed to draw daggers and swords but four more of them fell before the two Voth berserkers fell to the ground cut to pieces.

Devlin saw all of this happen in the corner of his eye but he focused on the remaining Voth; the Voth that charged towards him.

Devlin fired his left gun dead center in the huge Voth's chest. He saw the satisfying spray of blood behind the Voth. The Voth didn't slow. Devlin's boots slipped and he fell backwards as the Voth's giant axe swung over his head. The Voth overextended and fell onto Devlin, pinning him under three hundred pounds of thick muscle. Devlin pulled his sharp dagger from the top fold of his boot and stabbed it into the man's thigh. When this showed little effect he raised it and stabbed deep into the Voth's side.

Devlin felt the rush of air spurt out from a burst lung. A smell or rot and decay poured out of the Voth's mouth as the huge man roared. The Voth vomited dark blood as his lungs filled up from the dagger's wound. Devlin saw burning rage, still very alive, in the Voth's eyes. The Voth opened his mouth wide, preparing to tear Devlin's face off with his ragged brown teeth. Devlin rammed his second pistol deep into the Voth's mouth and pulled the trigger. He closed his eyes against the dark warmth that sprayed across Devlin's face.

Devlin pushed the huge man, now half headless, off and stood up. He

wiped dark blood from his face with one leather-gloved hand. He saw the vacant look in Aerus's eyes.

"First Musketeer. Gather your men, reload, fix bayonets, and come with me."

Devlin heard Aerus give the order as he reloaded his pistols. With loaded guns and a deep breath, Devlin entered the witch's hut.

The smell hit Devlin first. A pungent aroma of spoiled meat and burning hair sat thick in the hut. Burning sticks of black incense and a large boiling pot of a thick brown liquid poured smoke into the air. Carcasses of animals and human skulls hung from the hut's wooden supports and sat on large stained tables. Sitting on the floor in the back of the hut, the Voth witch grinned at them.

She sat half naked, her gray-skinned breasts sagging down her chest. Folds of skin hung from her thin atrophied arms. Her eyes, orbs of pure white, stared past them. Every ounce of her, every ounce of this place, filled him with dread and horror beyond imagination. He felt his mind cracking like dead wood. The witch began to whisper in a sickening and ancient tongue. Devlin felt his vision begin to close into thin tunnels of darkness. The stench of the place filled his nose and mouth, choking him.

Devlin felt the witch's mind slipping into his, whispering to him in a dark language he shouldn't understand. She told him to draw his pistol and put it in his mouth. She told him how easy it would be to forget all of this blood and war. She told him of the peace that waited for him.

Devlin drew and fired his left eagle-hammered gun into the witch's face.

More than anything in his life, Devlin wanted to leave that foul den and get into the open air. He turned and pushed back the skins covering the hut's door. Sunlight hit him like a hammer. He breathed in clean air deep into his lungs. His eyes met Aerus's and he saw the horror in the young man's eyes. They came to kill an old woman and they lost fourteen men.

"You lost fourteen men." Avalon's eyes burned into him. The thudding in Devlin's temples continued. He could feel thin cold lines snaking into his ears and in the ducts in his eyes. He could feel them laced through his head, each one picking over an image or a thought or a feeling. Avalon hadn't just listened to his story, Avalon had seen every moment of it. He knew how Devlin felt seeing his men cut to pieces. He knew what the witch's hut had smelled like. He knew how close Devlin had come to putting one of those eagle-hammered pistols into his mouth as the sightless eyes of the witch watched.

One by one, Devlin felt the tentacles withdraw from his mind. Devlin saw a drop of sweat flow down the side of Avalon's bald head. The man looked old and tired.

"You may return to your unit, Sergeant." Avalon dabbed at the sweat with a small white cloth. "We will write a full report and send it to your commanding officer for his review." Avalon's eyes captured Devlin's once more.

"You are not to speak to anyone of what we have discussed here today. You will not speak of me. You will not speak of the Tower. If you do, we will know." Avalon let the sinister words hang heavy in the air and then he sat back in his chair and smiled. "You may go."

Devlin felt numb as he left the small office and walked down the stone steps. His hands worked from instinct as they strapped on his pistols and his saber.

When he stepped out of the Tower and felt sunlight on his face, relief washed over him. The feeling was eerily similar to the feeling he felt when he left the witch's hut. His head throbbed but he felt the pain was quickly slipping away. He breathed deep, feeling the clean air pushing out the stale air of the Tower that had filled his lungs.

Yet in his mind Devlin saw the sightless eyes and rotten-tooth grin of the witch as she smiled at him. He would see her face and hear her dark words for the rest of his life. One day he might listen to those dark words that slid through his head like a tune of which he couldn't let go. He might one day put his silver eagle-hammered pistol into his mouth and forget the horrors of that day and the day the Tower made him remember it.

Author's Notes: I had just left a polygraph examination when the idea of Loyalty came to me. In a world of telepaths why wouldn't a

telepathic examination take place for the promotion of the military to important ranks? This was my first Northern Faigon story with the talk of the emperor, the Voth wars, the three-cornered hats, the muskets and flintlocks, and the Tower of the Eye. A lot of the flavor for the other Faigon stories began in this one. Still, the story suffers from the lack of a real ending. He passes his test but so what? I also think making a story about a flashback is always dangerous. People hate flashbacks.

The Fall of the Knives

Deep in the libraries of the Kingdom of Laeer tens of thousands of voices beg to tell their tales. They speak through the written word inked on parchment and paper and bound in leather. They whisper of kings long dead, empires that lie in dust, and worlds lost in time. These voices require only the reader's eye to cast their telepathic spell. The spell connects two minds, that of the writer and of the reader, across space and time.

Buried within a dark sub-basement, crushed between two huge tomes recounting the lineage of a spoiled kingdom, a few yellowed and crumbling pages lay folded and bound with an ancient cross of twine.

If each book in this grand library were a voice, the voices would roar. Powerful official voices list the accomplishments of kings. Flowery and light voices tell tales of love. The harmonic voices of bards sing songs of victory in war. These voices pour through the halls of the great library but if one is disciplined enough one would hear a dying voice tell a dying story. It is the voice of an old man who has but one task left to him. Though deep into the twilight of his life and standing at the threshold of existence, his troubled voice begs for one last favor, one last request.

Hear me.

I do not know how much time I have left. I seem to grow closer to death by the second. My hand grows cold as I pen these few words. Soon I will pass and all that I know will be lost. It is for this reason that I have rejected the peace I had hoped to have when death finds me. Instead I must recount a tale of horror and sadness. I have put off this moment for sixty years. Now death is upon me and I cannot escape the telling of this tale. Hear me, for I have not told this tale before now and I will never tell it again. Hear me and I will tell you the tale of the falling of the Knives.

My name is Lorian Graywing and I was once an adventurer. I sought what many farm hands desire when they lie awake at night after a day of hard work; fame, fortune, and women. I belonged to an adventuring group known as the Company of Knives. It was a pompous name but adventurers for hire need a name and that one was ours.

There were four of us all together. The group's founder, a golden-haired knight named Galen Flamehand and his mate, the priestess Sulania, had traveled south from their home city as part of their service to their goddess. I did not know if sleeping together was part of this service but I said little of it. The fourth was Dorgen Axehandle; an old and scarred hunter of the northern mountains who spoke little. He spent his nights polishing his wide-bladed axe or fixing the links on his mail while the rest of us shared our tales.

In the winter months of our third year together we had hunted down and killed a raiding party of bandits who had ransacked and robbed local travelers. On the bodies of one of the bandits we found a yellowed map with notes written in an ancient script. It showed the way to an old burial site containing objects of possible great value. It took us only a few minutes and a single drink at the tavern that night to agree that we would seek out this crypt.

We spent a bit more gold than usual on our last night in town. We relaxed and ate well. We listened to wondrous tales. We sang. Galen and Sulania dancing together. Galen stood tall and handsome in his blue tunic and high boots and Sulania's thin white robes swirled around her as they danced.

It was wonderful to be with those friends that night. It was wonderful to bask in the love of Galen and Sulania. Even Dorgen roared and laughed with beer running down his thick beard as the night went on.

It was a great night for the four of us, and it would be our last great night.

We arrived at the site two days later and set up camp. A line of mountains stretched north and south for one hundred miles. At the base of one of these mountains a deep tunnel bored into the hard rock. We sat huddled around our small fire holding our cloaks tight against the cold wind. I saw Dorgen staring at the red moon with narrowed eyes and deep lines in his brow.

"It has been a long time since I've seen a moon that angry."

"What do you fear, my friend?" said Galen, turning to the hunter.

"We've faced many enemies together and made quite a name for ourselves," said Dorgen. "Sometimes there are places best left untouched and treasures best left to the dead.? Dorgen continued his stare at the moon and then drew his massive battleaxe from his pack. ?Whatever is down there will soon feel the blade of my axe." His own boast seemed to calm him and minutes later the hunter snored in time to the winds that howled in the night. The next day the four of us entered the crypt.

Cold wind blew through the cave like the breathing of a sleeping beast. Streams of dust fell from the rock ceiling. We followed the map through the network of caverns until a wall of large rocks blocked our path.

"The map leads to this spot," said Galen studying the yellowed parchment. Dorgen took a closer look at the pile of stones.

"These rocks were placed here. They won't stop us from getting through but I don't think they were meant to. It looks like they were meant to stop something from getting out."

"It looks like we dig." Galen sheathed his sword and took a lever from his pack. In half an hour of sweaty work, we had revealed a door. Dorgen, hammer in hand, took one look at us, winked, and bashed in the door with three swings.

Old stale air rushed out in a deep groan. Clouds of dust blinded us and blew out Galen's torch. In movement bordering on panic, Galen re-lit the torch. We stepped into the chamber.

The room was thirty feet square with a ceiling so high that Galen's torch could not break through the darkness. Dust and cobwebs filled

the room and the new air of the outside cavern blew it into frenzied eddies. Large stone tablets lined the walls. In the center of the room was a solid table carved with images of battles long past. On top of this podium was a tome gray with dust and tied to the table in a blanket of thin webs.

Galen followed the perimeter of the room studying the carvings while Sulania and I went to the book. She wiped off the dust and opened the cracking leather-bound cover. Dorgen stayed by the crypt's entrance.

"This script is ancient," said Sulania reading the first page of the large book and then turning it to the last. "I cannot understand much of it."

"It looks like it is from the Fanoldorn Empire, somewhere during the second age." Galen spoke, studying a carving on the wall. "Look at this armor. It hasn't been worn like that for almost twelve hundred years."

"Klathron....klathron," Sulania muttered. Her tongue danced around the strange word. "What does that mean?"

"It means cell. Prison." Dorgen said. His eyes were narrow and his grip tightened. "This is no crypt."

Galen turned a corner and his torch illuminated a large iron box.

"What is that?" The box was six feet high and covered in rust. Strange runes and glyphs were etched into the surrounding border and a thick rod bolted the box closed. "Is it our king's jewels?" Galen put his hand on the bolt.

In my years with Galen I never knew him to make a rash or stupid action. Perhaps the darkness within that cell whispered to him. Perhaps a crypt such as this drags up greed like a bloated corpse in a swamp. Perhaps a knight such as he could not leave a dark shadow unlit. I can only tell you what he did. I cannot tell you why.

Galen pulled the bolt up and the iron sarcophagus swung open. The image of what was inside would stay with me forever, burned in the back of my eyes like the sun. It smelled like the half digested contents of a dead fish splayed open. It was humanoid, with translucent gray skin covering sharp edged bones and dripping with a clear liquid. The creature's thin twisted legs were bent up so its knees touched its shoulders. One arm crossed over its chest. Each of the impossibly long fingers ended in jagged yellow claws. The other arm appeared to be a long tentacle, thick at the shoulder and thinner as it wrapped around the beast's waist. A single horn protruded from the center of the

creature's skull bending upward.

I had never seen a creature so alien. Each curve of its vaguely humanoid appearance assaulted my sense of reason and logic. A being so horrible could not exist.

The creature opened its eyes.

Galen's face illuminated in the violet glow of the demon's hellish gaze and the knight screamed. His sword, slayer of forty barbarian ravagers and six warlords, fell clattering to the stone floor. His scream cut off when a long fingered hand fired out with impossible speed and grasped Galen's throat. With the snapping of its twisted bones, trapped and unmoved inside a box for twelve hundred years, the creature stepped out onto the floor.

The demon stood nine feet tall. I could see lines of black liquid streaming under its skin. Its stomach hung in a sagging bag of rotten organs. The demon's legs bent backward at the knee and seemed to have too many joints.

The demon smashed Galen against the table in the center of the room. The table broke into pieces under the knight's body. I saw a flash of silver and black fall from the shattered altar but the sight fell out of my mind. The beast dropped low and uncurled its tentacle arm over its body. It ended in a ball of heavy bone and a single long spike.

My legs failed me and I fell to the ground. The beast let out a hiss and lurched towards me, its long claws scratching into the floor.

Dorgen saved my life. He cleaved hard at the foul beast and his axe cut deep into the transparent skin of the demon's side. The demon screamed in fury that echoed off of the walls and made my ears ring. The creature turned and its tentacle arm whipped out twice like a scorpion's tail. It hammered into Dorgen's chest leaving two large holes in the hunter's mail armor. There was no blood coming from the wide black holes but the blows stole Dorgen's breath and he couldn't seem to inhale. Dorgen sucked in hard and air whistled into the holes in his chest. He vomited an ocean of blood that splashed to the floor at his feet. Dorgen fell onto his back, coughing for one last breath that would never come.

Sulania screamed in grief and the demon twisted its long body towards her. It opened its mouth and ran a black tongue over the bloody spike on the wavering tentacle. Her scream broke through the numbness of my shock and I saw again what I saw when the table had

shattered. It was a rod, perhaps two feet long with a silver and black orb at its end. The rod had been sealed into the solid podium and broke free when Galen's body had broken the table.

The rod called out to me. The danger around me faded into the background. I didn't see it when the beast reached out with its hideous claw and crushed Sulania's skull. I stepped over the broken rock and picked up the scepter.

Black electricity shot through my hand and my veins felt like they were full of thick syrup. I could hear my heart pounding and the sound was deafening. My vision blacked out. A few confusing seconds ticked by and then my head exploded in a deep and roaring voice. It spoke horrible dark words that made my skin crawl.

"KARFUL GHTN LGTKU ZTGFN PRK"

The words smashed through my head like a ram. They streamed past until I thought I would go insane and then they stopped. Perhaps two more seconds passed and then a slithery voice dripped over me like hot oil.

"SSLAVERNOIA KASSRULAKS CRAVENROLSOMM DROLZARTHZZ RADLASSMNASMM"

I felt as though a thin icicle drove through my ear. I tried to scream but it sounded hollow and weak next to the roar of the ancient voice and dark words. The river of pain ceased as suddenly as the first. Another two seconds passed.

"DRAW AND WIELD ME AND I SHALL SAVE YOUR LIFE"

"Wh...what are you?" My mind's voice spoke.

"REMEMBER...GATHZ ZTALMG FRONGTLAZ RUTZNGOM"

My world exploded again and I was back in the crypt. I just had time to hear Sulania's scream shatter as her head exploded between the demon's long fingers. All of her life, loves, adventures and victories dripped in bloody gray clumps through the demon's fingers and onto the floor.

The hissing beast turned to me and its violet eyes blazed. The creature's mouth opened revealing long sharp teeth and it let out the same hiss that made me want to puncture my own ear drums to be rid of it. It dropped low again and its wicked tentacle whipped back and

forth.

In a few seconds I would be dead. I wanted to die. I wanted all of this to be over. My friends had been torn to pieces and broken like twigs but for them the horror was over. I envied them.

"GATHZ"

The word entered my mind with the same chest crushing voice I had heard in my black out. The rod in my hand vibrated. The black orb at its tip shined. I raised the rod up and aimed its tip at the demon that had killed my friends.

"Gathz"

An arc of pure white lightning cracked from the rod's tip and into the beast's chest. The lightning knocked the demon back onto its rear legs and it howled with ear splitting sharpness. My hair stood on end.

"Ztalmg"

A roaring column of fire enveloped the screaming demon. Its skin burned off of its hellish bones. The beast rolled out of the burning column, its claws scraping across the floor. The demon's violet eyes turned towards me. This time they were not filled with murdering glee or fury, but with fear.

"Frongtlaz"

A black beam fired out and smashed into the demon's face. It ripped into the beast's skull and the demon convulsed. Its tentacle arm whipped faster than my eye could see. The beam stopped and the demon fell still to the floor.

The demon was still smoldering on the ground when I approached it. Wisps of white smoke drifted up from the beast's dead eyes. The smell made me sick. It was a mixture of sulfur and rotten meat.

"PUT THE BEAST INTO THE CELL BEFORE HE AWAKENS"

I put my hands over my ears but the voice would not be quieted. When it stopped I looked to the ruined creature and noticed tiny scrapes and cuts sealing themselves in the sickly gray skin. The wound Dorgen had cut was already healed. The beast was regenerating.

I could not tell you where I got the strength to drag the body over to

the iron cell but somehow I did. The thought of the beast returning to life must have given me the energy I needed.

I crossed the foul creature's arms over its sunken chest. With a heave, I pushed it into the cell and slammed the door shut. I slid the iron bolt back into place and relief flowed into me. The relief fell away when my eyes came upon the gray eyes of my friend, Dorgen. He was laying on his side in a pool of his own dark blood. My eyes turned to the ruins of Sulania but I could not stand what I saw and I looked away.

I heard Galen cough. It was quiet and raspy but it made my heart leap. His normally sturdy body lay in a heap against the broken alter. One of his legs was twisted at the knee. It was an injury that would give him a heavy limp until the day he died although he spent most of those days on a bar stool gulping pints of ale.

I made a splint and set Galen's leg as well as I could. I looked for material to build some sort of stretcher and came across scattered gems and jewels that must have come from inside the alter. I stuck these, the large tome, and the black rod into my own worn leather pack.

I dragged Galen's heavy body for two days and we finally found a main road. We arrived at our destination and I paid for a room and with the help of two burly farmhands we lifted Galen into the bed. The gems helped pay for the room and for a local healer. Galen's smaller wounds were healed and his leg was bound. The wound in his heart would never heal. His love, Sulania, was dead.

One evening Galen and I sat at a small scarred table in the corner of the tavern. I was sipping an expensive wine while Galen had his usual pint of ale in front of him. He wasn't gulping it down this time and, although it was getting late, he was not yet drunk.

"I loved her," Galen said looking at his large mug with pale and lifeless eyes. "I loved her when I was sixteen years old and still not allowed to hold a sword that wasn't made of wood." Galen turned his pale unblinking eyes on me and as much as I wanted to, I didn't look away.

"She loved the roads, Lorian. We both did. We could have returned to Glaforam two years ago and joined the order but we would have been separated. Out here we could stay together. Late at night we used to talk about retiring, settling down and having children. We just couldn't tear ourselves away from the hunt." Galen grew quiet for a moment. "We paid for it."

A tear rolled down one of his unshaven cheeks.

"Tell people about us, Lorian. Tell them of our adventures and tell them how we died." Galen looked deep into me. I had never seen him so serious. "Tell people that sometimes there is too high a price." He kept his eyes on mine a moment longer and then it fell back to his ale. He drank it down with a gulp.

Galen was dead six weeks later but that night, looking into those eyes, I knew he was dead already. I buried Galen deep in the woods outside the village. I buried the dark scepter and the ancient book with him. I did not hear the horrible voice again and I wished that no other ever would.

I buried the last member of the Knives besides myself and now after the writing of these words, I too will pass on and the Knives will be no more. I have lived many years after the day Galen died, but I had not wished to recount the tale.

My sense of relief at the telling of this story is great. I wrote these words to preserve our adventuring band and the friendship we shared. I wrote these words because I had to. I wrote them because I made a promise a friend.

Author's Notes: Fall of the Knives was my first real story. I wrote it under the idea of submitting it to Wizards of the Coast but never got around to sending it to them. I sent it to a few other magazines but no one bit. Fall of the Knives is my idea of a hard-fantasy story. It starts like any typical party-of-adventurers sort of fantasy story but changes quickly when their hero gets knocked out instantly, the pretty cleric has her head crushed, and the dwarf vomits out an ocean of blood and dies. Yep, the northman was really a dwarf in the first version but I changed him to get away from the Tolkein world. The speaking of the dark words was my tip of the hat to Lovecraft but I don't think it was worth spelling them out.

The Traffic Jam

John hit the traffic late Friday afternoon. Traffic jams weren't uncommon on a Friday in L.A. but never one like this. Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" flowed out of his window as he unrolled it and turned off the air. No sense wasting gas.

He called Susan and talked about dinner and maybe going to see a movie. She told him she had her church choir tonight but there was leftover pizza from the weekend. She was always going to goddamn

church. They said goodbye but he didn't tell her he loved her. He regretted it.

He sat looking at his black cell phone, flipping it open and closed over and over with his thumb. He looked over the road and saw five lanes of traffic, three lanes and two shoulders, packed with old Chevies and new BMWs. A black man in a white shirt and tie sat back and listened to Prince. Jack smiled and lipped the words to himself, turning his keys and shutting off the ignition and shutting down Stevie Nicks.

"Two thousand zero zero party's over, out of time. So tonight we're going to party like it's nineteen ninety nine." Jack hated to admit it but he liked this song. He liked a lot of Prince songs.

Jack opened the collar of his starched shirt and pulled open his red patterned tie. His leather shoes dug into his feet. They were not two hundred dollars well spent.

Jack looked at the cars around him and the people inside: business men in suits, techies in golf shirts and khakis, blue collar folks in gray shirts splattered with paint and blue jeans about five hundred years old. A couple of young girls beside him giggled. He saw them both chatting into independent cell phones.

It didn't matter what they drove or how much they made, they were all stuck in the same traffic. A fat man in a suit rolled his head forward and then banged it against the head rest of his dark blue Mercedes SUV. Sixty thousand dollars so he could sit in traffic with the rest of us, thought Jack. The fat man's hands gripped the leather wheel like he was about to go into orbit.

A girl came out of the sunroof of a Camero wearing only a white bra and blue jeans. The driver, a young guy with an Indian's ball cap turned around backwards, ignored her. Most of the other men seemed to take notice, though. The girl stretched her arms back and scratched at the bra's clasp.

A minute later an Asian man in a yellow short-sleeved shirt got out of his Accord and peered down between the lanes of cars. There was nothing to see, both he and Jack knew it, but he looked anyway.

Jack didn't think that was such a bad idea. He put the car into park and stepped out onto the asphalt. How few people actually set foot on this road, Jack wondered. He studied the details in the paint of the white lines. He looked at a black skid mark and a large chunk of rock that broke off of the concrete center divide barrier. The black Prince

fan slept with his head back. Three or four others walked around and pretended to see what the trouble was.

The girl in the bra slipped back into the Camero. A guy went three cars up and pointed at a young woman he apparently knew. "It's your fault," he said with a grin. The woman rolled her eyes. It was bad enough putting up with his fake flirting all week, now she faced it here in the mother of all traffic jams. Jack smiled again.

The black man's radio went to static. The man woke up and pressed a button on the radio. More static. He pressed a third time. Static.

Jack could hear it from a few open windows around him. The two girls both simultaneously said "Hello? Hello?" into their phones. Seven or eight people on the road, traffic zombies, all stared in wonder at their cell phones. Jack narrowed his eyes and looked at his own phone. No signal. He looked over and the black man continued to press station after station.

Then the world went white. It was the brightest flash Jack had ever seen. He covered his eyes with the sleeve of his arm and it cut through it anyway. Darkness returned and he opened his eyes, blinking. He saw the black man continuing to press buttons on his radio as if nothing had happened. One of the girls in the car screamed, the other blinked and pressed fingers into her blinded eyes. Jack saw the Asian man standing in the street. The man's cell phone fell to the ground as he stared west across the rows of cars. Jack followed his gaze.

Jack only thought of one word: beautiful. A column of a black cloud wide at the base and at the top, mushroomed out of the city. The massive cloud stretched thousands of feet in the air and miles across. As Jack watched, a wave rippled through the earth towards them, sending cars, construction equipment and pieces of office buildings soaring into the air.

"Why didn't we hear of this?" Jack thought. "Why did the radio keep playing 1999 by Prince instead of telling us? Jack remembered a documentary he watched on asteroids threatening earth. Scientists said it was likely that the government wouldn't tell the populace about any sort of impact, that the information would do no good at all except cause panic. Best that people die as they live; chattering like insects into cell phones and eating Whoppers. Jack watched a bus tumble end over end and then crash into the ground. He could almost hear the screams of the people inside as the crash turned them into hamburger.

Jack thought of Susan and remembered the last time he kissed her, really kissed her. They were outside in the yard talking about the length of the grass early in the spring. She turned to him and smiled. She was beautiful. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close to him. She gave out a little yelp. He kissed her hard and placed his hand on her left breast. She softened in his arms, letting him hold her up. Her jaw relaxed. The kiss was smooth and warm and wonderful. They went inside and made love but the kiss was the climax for both of them. He loved her and he wished he told her so.

The two girls in the car held each other in a last embrace as the ripple of earth raced towards them. A wall of paper and rock and metal and fire roared at them faster than the speed of sound. They still hadn't heard a thing. The Asian man stood and stared with a calm look on his face. The black man continued pressing buttons on his radio. The girl in the white bra, her shirt now back on, stood out of the sunroof and watched the roaring wall of rock and fire drive towards them.

Yuppies, office workers, computer security professionals, house painters, students, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, they were all here. It was a sampling from every walk of life. Their money didn't matter. Their kids didn't matter. The cost of their car or the ring tone on their cell phone didn't matter. Nothing they had done in their lives would change this moment. They were all born in water and they would all die in fire. Jack thought of Susan again just before the nuclear wave hit him.

Author's Notes: I wrote Traffic Jam while I was actually stuck in a traffic jam on 295 in Washington D.C. The girl really did take her top of and sunbathe in her bra three cars up from me. No one seemed to mind. I think I had to write the last few lines at home but the bulk of the story was written in a Moleskine on the steering wheel of my Mustang. In the original version, some big green cloud came and burned out everyone's lungs. I don't remember why I changed it to a nuke, but there it is.

The Book of Chaos

Of all of the steps Ghenni Blackflame would have to follow these six days and nights, the first was the most dangerous. Ghenni knelt on the cold stone floor of the top floor of her tower in the city of the Wheel. Her black hair hung free down her back and down to the tops of her bare ivory breasts. Red flames danced in her brown almond-shaped eyes. She whispered streams of the abyssal tongue she spent so many years learning. She beckoned to one of the three hooded hulking

eunuchs behind her. The shadow faced castrated man stepped forward, a crying baby in his hands. Chained to the wall behind the blazing inferno in the center of the pit of the circular floor, the child's mother, also naked and no more than sixteen herself, cried in despair.

Ghenni paid no attention to the young girl. Her lips continued twisting over the obscene language known to so very few. She drew a thin sharp dagger off of the floor next to a line of other diabolic implements, powders, and potions. Without hesitation she plunged the dagger into the heart of the screaming child. The young mother wailed and hung from her chains as her child's lifeblood flowed down Ghenni's hands and into large wet pools on the stone floor.

Ghenni threw the child's corpse into the blazing fire in the center of the floor. The fire crackled and burst, licking the high domed ceiling with orange and red flame. Ghenni stood on bare feet and watched as the heat soaked into her slender naked body.

The flames went black. They still burned hot but the flames soaked in light instead of releasing it. Ghenni's eyes widened in excitement and her hands clasped in front of her large breasts. She stared into the depths of the abyss and watched the shadows dance.

A black claw tore out of the dark flames. It had three fingers, long and jointed in nine places. It was tipped with a nail two inches long and split down the center forming two sharp points on each finger. Another claw followed the first, seeming to tear out of the flames. A pair of chrome eyes shone from within the black flames. A foot, long and jointed backwards, stepped out and onto the stone floor. Spurs of bone jutted from the thin hoof-like foot. Another foot stepped out and the abyssal fiend entered the tower of Black Flame from another world of shadow and cold.

A dark abyssal voice spoke ancient words in a harmony of hundreds of voices, both high and low pitched. All of the five humans in the room heard it from within the depths of their minds. The young girl screamed and clenched her eyes shut. The eunuchs did nothing. Ghenni felt waves of orgasmic pleasure flow through her naked body with each dark word.

The demon stood nine feet tall and a clear liquid dripped over its black oily skin. Three of its four arms hung at its sides, the other curled near its narrow chest holding the charred body of the sacrificed baby. It never moved its unblinking silver eyes as it raised the baby's body and opened a mouth filled with hundreds of teeth in four rows.

The teeth were as sharp as broken glass. No vocal chords lined its smooth throat. Its mouth was a black hole to the depths of its infernal stomach. Three red fleshy tentacles slid out and wrapped around the baby's head. It bit down in a sickening crunch, red blood flowed down its gaping mouth. It swallowed the baby whole. Ghenni could see the bulge as the babe slid down its wide throat.

Ghenni whispered in the same dark tongue and the creature of the black hells returned the words, its telepathic voice booming in her head. It turned and beheld the young mother of the baby he had just devoured. Ghenni motioned to one of the eunuchs and the eunuch moved to the young girl and dragged her naked to a stone alter on the west side of the room. Two other eunuchs approached and they bound the pale girl face up on the stone table, her hands and feet bound wide. The three eunuchs stood away and the tall demon approached.

Never had there been an act more defiling to the word "love". The beast mounted her and she screamed as it entered her. Its tongue slid over her face and down her throat, gagging and choking her. She bit down and thick black blood oozed from the red tongue but the beast cared not. Its claws tore at her breasts, full and damp with mother's milk. It crushed her repeatedly against the alter in an act of mating more horrible than any act of the natural world. When it finished it let out a telepathic roar that sent Ghenni to her knees. The girl had fallen mercifully unconscious, blood streaming from her nose and down her thin legs. Ghenni opened her eyes and saw the huge demon kneeling on the stone floor, its energy fully spent.

Ghenni spoke a single word and the eunuch's moved quickly. One clamped two pairs of shackles on the beast's four arms. A long chain connected to the shackles traveled up into a hole in the domed ceiling. Another eunuch clamped a pair of shackles chained to the floor around the creature's thin ankles. The demon's eyes went wide. Another eunuch quickly went to place a silver circlet around the beast's head but it wasn't fast enough. The beast sent a telepathic blast deep into the brain of the eunuch that had shackled its feet. There was a sickening crack and blood gushed from the eunuch's nose, mouth, eyes, and ear. It fell in spasms to the ground, its head split apart from the inside.

The other eunuch pressed the circlet around the demon's head and clamped it down. The dark deep voce and accompanying buzz cut off. The demon opened its mouth in a silent cry. It bit down on the eunuch's shoulder and hundreds of teeth flayed off the eunuch's skin to the bone. The eunuch tore free, ripping flesh and muscle. Blood

sprayed from the huge wound and it too fell dead to the ground.

One of the last two eunuchs went to the wall and pulled a lever. A huge counterweight shifted behind the stone walls and the chain connected to the demon's arm shackles tore up into the ceiling. It stretched the demon from floor to ceiling, breaking one wrist, dislocating the two lower shoulders, and tearing the tendons in one of the demon's knees. The creature let out another silent scream. The circlet prevented any true communication but Ghenni could see the fear and anger the beast felt.

Ghenni gathered up the dark implements laying on the floor next to her and walked towards the bound demon. The other remaining eunuch untied and lifted the young unconscious girl from the alter and took her back to the cells below. If the demon seed took root, the girl might birth a valuable servant. Most likely whatever abomination the girl might bear would die and take the girl with it. But now was not the time to ponder such things.

Ghenni had work to do.

Ghenni stood naked in front of the oily-skinned creature. It stared at her with its silver eyes and opened its maw. She marveled at the creature, a being capable of destroying armies and crushing castles to dust. It could be a thousand years old, living its ancient life in a world completely alien to Ghenni; a world of chaos and shadow. Ghenni heard another pop as one of its upper shoulders dislocated.

Ghenni lifted a bowl and drew an impossibly sharp knife across the demon's thick neck. Black blood gushed out, splashing across Ghenni's face and breasts. She held the bowl under the gushing wound and filled it nearly to the top. She handed this to the returning eunuch who took it to a large oak table and filled a large round bottle. Ghenni drew the knife across the creature's belly and its alien organs splashed to the stone ground in front of it. Some of these organs pulsed and throbbed. Others, under the drastic change in this world's atmosphere from the demon's own, burst open. Ghenni cut these organs from the demon's body yet the demon lived on.

Ghenni put down the knife and picked up a hooked blade. She neatly flayed the skin from the creature's chest, back, arms, and thighs in oily black sheets. The demon raised its head to the ceiling in silent agony, its charcoal gray muscles exposed and streaming lines of thick blood onto the floor.

Ghenni stretched these sheets of flayed skin across racks of iron in front of the blazing fire. She carefully scraped off the fatty flesh from the insides of the sheets of black skin. She returned to the flayed demon and with a pair of sharp clippers, began clipping strands of muscle fiber and sinews from the demon's arms. It snapped in insane attempts to tear Ghenni's face off of her skull.

Ghenni reached up behind the stretched creature's field of view and snipped off one of its long fingers from its hand. The demon's four rows of teeth clicked as black blood flowed down its flayed arm.

Ghenni began tossing the demon's organs into the fire in the center of the room. Each burst open in an explosion of fluid and deep green flames. As they baked in front of the flames, Ghenni continued to scrape the stretched skin until it became thin enough to see the flames through its translucent surface. She kept one patch of skin from the demon's chest thick. She boiled this piece of skin in a pot of dark fluid and then left it hanging in half over one of the racks.

Ghenni spread each of the large sheets of scraped, stretched, and baked skin and cut them into thirty rectangular squares. She stacked these and punched four holes vertically down their center. She separated these into three stacks and with a steel needle, she threaded them together with thin threads of the demon's muscle fiber. Ghenni sewed all three stacks together and bound them into the thick hardened leather of the demon's chest.

It had been nearly twelve hours but the lack of any windows prevented Ghenni from seeing any change in the day. She held up the demon-skinned tome and marveled at her own craftsmanship.

Ghenni took the finger she had severed and boiled it. Once dried in a fire, the finger became rigid. She sliced down the center of the nail and bore a small hole in the quick. She drew the bottle of demon blood and poured into a small inkwell of black onyx. She mixed in powdered iron and another powder grinded from one of the demon's teeth. She dipped the finger's nail into the blood mixture and watched it take the demonic ink.

The demon hung limp from its torn and broken limbs. Ghenni lit two black candles, their own flames burning green and filling the room with blue smoke. She felt the smoke saturate her and filled her visions with strange shifting shapes. She could see the demon's eyes grow wide and its tongue hung loose from its gaping mouth. Ghenni approached the demon and unclasped the circlet around its head.

Immediately the telepathic buzz of the demon's mind filled her head. She rushed back to the oak table and began to scribe as a stream of abyssal speech and imagery filled her mind from the broken and tormented mind of the demon.

She wrote furiously for nearly twenty hours. Gray streaks lined her hair and her eyes sunk into their sockets but the fiendish transcription continued. Dark rights never known to humans were outlined and diagramed. The horrifying preparation of sacrifice and calling to the deeper creatures of the shadow-filled abysses lay neatly outlined in demonic blood. She sketched strange and mind twisting diagrams of geometrical patterns unlike any found in nature, patterns that threatened to open up doorways to the darker worlds laying within the cracks in our own. She outlined demonic anatomy and the names of hundreds of these creatures. All of this she inked onto the flayed skin of the abyssal creature she had called.

Hours rolled forward. Blood oozed from blisters on Ghenni's hand. Her hand cramped in agony but the writing continued. Finally the last drop of the fiendish ink fell as she filled the last page of the dark tome. Ghenni's Book of Chaos was complete. Never before had any mortal so accurately captured the voices of the lower worlds in such a volume. It had come at great cost. Ghenni's skin hung limp from her bones. Her voluptuous beauty now looked thin and sickly. She had aged forty years in two nights. Deep wrinkles cut into the flesh of her face. Her breasts, once full and plump now hung limp on her chest. Ghenni looked to the tome. The price was worth it.

Ghenni closed the demonskin tome and behind her the demon died.

Author's Notes: This is probably the most violent and disturbing story I ever wrote. I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to publish it, with the rape and baby killing and all of that, but again, Robert Howard didn't shy away from it seventy years ago so why should I shy from it now? I thought the story was half horror and half book binding instruction manual, but I liked it none the less. I thought it might work as a perfect introduction to a longer story about this book and I have no doubt that the Book of Chaos will find its way into other stories. Still, I don't have any plans to write another story as ugly as this one.

Citizen Fred's Book

Citizen Fredrick Joseph Abergale stared at the object sticking out of the dirt hill. He had worked on this trail for six hours now and it was the first man made object he had seen. When he awoke to the

soothing voice of Citizen G giving him the job of inspecting and clearing the trails of Great Falls for that day, his heart sank. The trails were twenty kilometers away from the huge towers of the city and offered little distraction from the sharp cool air, the frighteningly wide sky, and the sickly green foliage creeping all around him.

Static filled his earbud. He only caught bursts of the microshows and had no idea if he was supposed to laugh or mourn. Rarely did he hear the fanfare at the beginning or end of the forty five second microdrama or microcomedy so all cues for feeling were gone.

The silence covered Fred like a cloak. It squeezed him and dropped moments of quiet in the normal bustle of his mind. In twenty minutes he would return to the road where a gyrocoptor would take him to the supershuttle and back to his home on the two thousand forty sixth floor of dwelling tower 23.

Then he saw the object half buried in the hill. Only the corner of the rectangular object shined from under the dirt. A shining plastic covered the corner of the black rectangle. It frightened Fred to look at it. It was alien to him. He kicked at it with one dirt-covered work boot. More dirt fell and the object slid down the hill. With one gloved hand he reached out and pulled it free. The black rectangle was sealed in some sort of plastic bag with a complex fastener at the top far different from the atomic fasteners Fred was used to.

Fred pulled at the seal and it popped open with a puff of stale dust. He pulled farther and the plastic cover burst open and fell off the black rectangle inside. He recognized it at once, though he had never seen one in his life.

It was a book.

Fred's heart leapt and fell all at once. He had never been so scared or excited. He had never seen a book before, though he had once seen a picture in one of the historical data archives. He didn't know what it was and Citizen G would not tell him, but an ancient man Fred once cared for in a Medicare center spoke of these books. Fred thought the man was senile. Now however, he held one himself.

Don't Be Evil.

The words, the only law of the planet now, hammered in Fred's head. What would not be evil? Should he destroy the book? Should he bury it? Should he take it with him and tell Citizen G of it on the gyrocoptor? That feeling of excitement filled Fred again. His fingers

ran over the black oilcloth cover. An elastic band held the book closed. When he touched it, the elastic snapped like brittle rubber. It fell away in three small black pieces and all thoughts of turning the book in fell away along with them.

Fred opened the book.

Most of the characters of the first page were difficult to make out. Fred's eyes, used to only reading the ideal font decided upon by Citizen G, had to trace over each character before recognizing it. One word and one four-digit number, once recognized, sent waves of electricity through Fred's cold body.

"January 2005"

Truth dawned on Fred like hot sunlight. The small book he held was nearly five hundred years old. His hands trembled. What words filled these ivory pages? No one knew what life was like so long ago. Few cared. Now Fred would read the words of another person like himself from centuries ago. He would hear the voice and read the mind of someone dead for at least four hundred years. His last hesitation broke and he turned to the next page.

Fred struggled with the first few pages before subconsciously recognizing the strange handwritten letters and words. Soon, with script and language problems falling away with each word, Fred fell into the stories themselves.

When he looked up two hours later, Fred saw the last rays of sunlight reflecting off of the two-mile high datacenters to the south. He looked up at the criss-crossing white trails of the supertransports in the sky above him. For his forty years, Fred looked at these trails but only now did he really see them. They looked like a web.

He felt the words of the book seeping into his thoughts. He felt his previous ideas and beliefs crumble and fall. Like a rogue program tearing through a central processing unit, the stories of that book burnt all new paths and circuits in Fred's brain.

Fred didn't know what to do. He didn't know that in eight months he would plant a home-made bomb that would send one of the Citizen G datatowers crashing into twelve others. He didn't know that he would stand on this hill a decade later, lean and starving but never so alive. He didn't know that his grandchildren, naked and brown and wielding flint-headed spears, would hunt down wild deer for food.

Fred walked silently to the waiting gyrocoptor, tucking the small black book into the deep pocket of his blue overalls. His mind was empty and his thoughts were clear. And he was not afraid.

Author's Notes: I wrote this story as part of a Moleskine short story event. People were supposed to write essays about our favorite little black notebooks so I wrote a fictional one instead. I also wrote this story in a Moleskine, of course, in the hopes that in one thousand years, some jackass will dig it up and be amused for all of forty seconds. This is also the first story I have about a dystopian society based on Google taking over the world.

The Sword of Light

The poisoned stink of the gray haze tore into Alun's nose and throat like wet razors. He had pulled his thick maroon scarf over his nose and mouth but it helped little. Alun's green eyes and tangled thick mop of black self-cut hair were visible over the scarf.

Alun gazed over the wastelands of Disease, his heart sinking. Throughout his life as a hunter and adventurer, Alun wished to travel to the Planes. He heard stories of the twisted worlds as a boy in Qeynos and while most dismissed them as legend, Alun embraced them in the dark of night.

For twenty years Alun crossed the lands of Norrath seeking adventure, fame, and fortune. He looked forward to the day he would return to Qeynos's gates and face the children, now adults like himself, who dismissed his dreams as foolishness. He wanted to drop a small bag of perfect diamonds into their hands and smile as the shine of the gems shattered their cynicism like thin glass. Most of all he wanted to see Ghenny with her long straw-like blonde hair and thin rounded body. He would see her light-blue eyes shine in amazement when he walked into her tailoring shop carrying wondrous tales of adventure.

For twenty years Alun sought adventure across the lands. He traveled throughout Antonica and to the lands of Kunark where he fought the Sarnak for the kingdom of the elves. He traveled to the frozen lands of Velious, fighting in the Ringwar of the Divide. His adventures strengthened the thin sickly boy who left Qeynos so long ago. His muscles grew thick. His skin became tough and leathery under the harsh sun and cutting winds. Adventure took Alun to the furthest reaches of the mortal lands and into the depths of himself. Now, however, they took him into hell.

Any visions of his childhood dreams and memories of young Ghenny grew black and died when he beheld Disease. This land knew no beauty or happiness or love. Such things became faded dreams in Alun's mind when he saw the horror and carnage of this poisoned land. The land fed off of life like a leech. It infected, ate, and killed everything it could.

Nausea flooded Alun's stomach as he beheld the tainted world. The ground was of plagued flesh, yellow and brown. Poisonous gases filled the sky with a purple and green haze. Huge stalks of infected hair grew as tall as trees, sagging under their bloated oily weight. An enchanted ring on Alun's finger filtered out the poison of this world's air but no magic would filter the global stench of decay. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to relax, Alun took his first steps into the lower world.

The lack of any sun made it difficult for Alun to sense time or direction. He pulled his violet cloak tight around him, though sweat glued the tunic under his fine chain armor tight to his skin. The foul air burned at the exposed skin on his forehead. His worn leather boots sunk in the fleshy ground. Gases and sprays of oil erupted with each step. Huge stone mountains tore through the horizon of the dark world.

A green thick river cut a deep ravine in the ground. Alun's lungs almost seized with the toxic fumes the river belched into the poisoned air. He held a leather-gloved hand to the scarf at his mouth. His eyes burned.

Alun followed the river down-stream. Each step brought more doubt into his mind. Why was he here? What could he hope to gain in such a foul world? What damage would this place do to him? Had it already done it?

These questions ran out of his mind when a glimmer of silver caught his attention from the top of a hill growing out of the ground like cancer. Alun turned and approached the hill. What shined silver in a world of rot?

A few minutes later, Alun had his answer. Four piles of decaying flesh and bone lay scattered over the festering mound. The infected stench of decay hung heavy in the air. In the center of the mound lay the remains of a man. Unlike the four piles of diseased rot, the bones and garments of the man were undisturbed. Old boots covered in a dust not of this world covered the figure's feet. Empty trousers, cut and

torn, lay flat on the body's legs. A shirt of fine mail and a dark blue cloak hung loose on the body's torso. However, it was the blade that stole Alun's attention.

The sword stabbed deep into the fleshy hill, its presence a shining light in a dark world. The pink flesh of the hill cracked and died around the sword's wound. Grey veins spread outward from the sword like the infection of a deep splinter. Its silver white blade and golden blue hilt stood in razor sharp contrast to the lands around it. This world never knew a blade like this before and the wound it left would never heal. Green roots grew from the golden-accented hilt down the silvery edge. Runes and glyphs from an ancient and smooth language traveled down the center of the blade.

The corpse's hand gripped the hilt in a strong possessive grasp. As he stepped closer to the body and the sword, Alun saw what had killed the swordsman. Bile rose up in Alun's throat when he saw the horror of the wounds. The body's left arm was a ruin of splintered bone and rotten flesh. Four wide holes surrounded by luminescent green oil hammered through the body's chest plate. A long cut burned through the body's mail-armored abdomen fusing the chain links into molten steel.

But the worst was its skull. One side of the skull was normal, its jaw stretched out in a final scream. The other side was melted like wax, its eye socket long and thin, stretching down to its deformed jaw. The side of the skull was caved in though it looked pushed and stretched instead of cracked. Bone did not melt in Norrath but something had melted it here.

A shock of adrenaline woke Alun from his horrified gaze. Something moved on the horizon of the next hill. Something was close and grew closer. A low buzzing filled Alun's head and vibrated the molars in his mouth. Alun reached under his cloak and drew a short sword. The blade, wider at the tip than at the base, shone bright in the dim air. The sword served him for ten of his twenty years in the wilds. He squeezed the leather-wrapped grip, shook the heavy blade in anxiety, and hoped it would serve him now.

Alun had seen strange and ugly beasts before. He fought the poisoned Frogloks of Sebilis. He fought the Thought Horrors of The Deep. The creature that dragged and scraped over the fleshy hill was beyond Alun's mind.

Eight segmented legs dripping with black fluid dragged over the pink-

orange ground. Two pair of long transparent wings stuck out of the bulbous body buzzing faster than Alun's eyes could see. Two engorged red eyes stuck out of the beast's head like tumors. The eyes glowed red when they beheld Alun on the hill and the beast chattered and clicked. Green poison dripped and sputtered from the creature's long pointed nose. The creature's bloated body writhed internally.

Nausea and horror filled Alun's mind and body. The reek of the demonic insect filled every pour on the hunter. His sweat felt like thick oil on his skin. Alun resisted the urge to fall to his knees or run screaming into the poisoned land.

Feelings of alien sickness and horror flooded through Alun and he realized it came from the beast itself. The demon's telepathy filled Alun's head making his eyes bulge and his temples throb. Sensing Alun's pain, the insect flew in. Alun swung.

Dwarven smiths forged Alun's blade from the strongest and most flexible steel known to them. Wizards enchanted the blade with runes of power. In one hundred battles the blade had never dulled or chipped. When the sword hit the demon's thick exoskeleton, the blade shattered like glass.

Alun stared at the shattered hilt in his hand and dropped it to the fleshy earth. He began to reach down to his left boot for a thin dagger he always kept there when another psychic wave crushed Alun's mind and sent him reeling onto his back. He felt the crunch of bone above the continued vibration of the demon. He opened his eyes and saw the insect flying in, thin legs tearing into the pink skin of the land and eyes filled with red fire. A glimmer of light to his left caught Alun's attention. The white-silver sword blazed next to him. Without thinking, Alun batted away the stubborn skeletal hand and grasped the sword's blue-gold hilt.

White energy crashed into Alun's mind like a hammer.

"Wield me!"

Power and strength flowed through Alun's veins. All of the demon's mental intrusions pushed out of his mind. He flew to his feet, the shining blade in his hand. Visions of an armored knight, wings on his helm and blue eyes burning from a beard-covered face, roared to life within Alun's mind.

"You hold in your hand the Sword of Light. Forged in the fires of Justice and cooled in the seas of Virtue, the sword of light seeks the

heart of all evil.

"Strike true!"

The insect flew in again, sizzling mucus flowing from its spiked nose.

Alun swung. Four of the demon's eight legs fell twitching and writhing to the pink ground. The demon reeled back on its twelve-foot wings, green fluid spraying from the four stumps on the demon's left side. Alun swung again. The sword cleaved off the spike on the beast's nose, sending it twirling into the air. The wound gushed black-green fluid in a shower. The thick liquid burned Alun's skin and the vision in one of his eyes went black. The beast slashed out with its remaining clawed legs and tore into Alun's armor leaving steaming wounds in his chest and belly.

"Strike!"

The voice exploded into his head and Alun stabbed the blade into the beast's belly. The belly of the insect broke open, spilling entrails and large white worms in writhing piles onto the earth. White fire erupted from the huge wound in the beast's belly. One of its huge red eyes burst into a cloud of yellow puss. The buzzing of the dying beast screamed in Alun's head. With a crash of breaking bone, the demon fell dead to the festering ground.

Breath burned into Alun's lungs. He pulled his scarf away, coughing red blood and black oil onto the ground. He lifted his hand to his face where the demon's ichor had sprayed it and his leather glove came back with a black green mess. His eye was gone. Energy continued to flow through his hand from the hilt of the white silver sword. The body of the demonic insect began to decompose into yellow dust and black ooze.

Another buzzing filled the air.

Alun turned his one good eye to the horizon where two more of the huge insects half flew half dragged their bloated masses over the edge of the hill. Alun turned to run.

"Wield me!"

Alun's feet froze. His hand tightened around the sword's ornate hilt. His body turned towards the demonic insects closing in upon him. He screamed in protest.

"Wield me!"

Alun turned and looked to the deformed twisted skeleton on the hill. It looked back at him from its one smooth oval socket, the other twisted and melted. Truth flooded into him like icy water.

This blade was forged in the fires of Justice and cooled in the waters of Valor. It was a weapon designed to slay evil and few beasts were as evil as these shelled horrors. It would fight them forever if it had to. It would never run away.

Nor would its wielder.

The demons closed in.

Author's Notes: I love shredding the lines between black and white and so I wrote one of two stories about weapons so pure in their goodness that they're actually pretty evil if you think about them. This was an Everquest story that never made it anywhere else. I may have sent it to SOE but they were probably too horrified by the writing to accept it. Still, its a fun yarn.

Vrenna and Togaru Village

Sunlight crested over the high walls of Togaru village and painted the sky in fire. The high walls, an artifact of wars forgotten for thousands of years, crushed in the few hundred villagers who called Togaru their home.

On the east wall, towering forty feet over the dusty ground below, stood Vrenna.

She stood balancing on the heels of her black leather boots. Her hands, also gloved in leather, hung loose at her sides. A jeweled saber hung from her wide belt just below the curve of her left hip.

Vrenna stood watching the sunlight stream past her and shine within the cracks and shadows of the city. She felt the warmth of the sun on her exposed thighs and back. Below her she heard the snores and grumbles of her prey. For seventy miles across barren rock and desert she tracked the three brigands. She tracked them for ten days, following them from the small farm they had burned and the family they had robbed, raped, and murdered. Vrenna felt little sorrow for the farmer and his family, whose bodies now fed oily vultures under the careless and burning sun. Such was life on the outskirts of civilization. Justice was a dream. Yet sometimes even the murderous

jackals stepped too close to the scorpion and justice came to the jackal just the same.

Enjoying the last warmth of the morning sun, Vrenna closed her eyes and dropped forward off of the wall.

Vrenna fell in a dive, arms out at her sides. Wind blew her raven hair back over her shoulders. She rolled forward, clasping her knees to her chest and then straightened out arms out and the sharp toes of her boots pointed downward. She fell like the barbed point of an arrow. She tore through the thick fabric awning above the three camping brigands. She grasped out at the awning's wooden edge and swung into a flip before falling into a crouch.

The three brigands didn't know what to make of the figure that had fallen from the sky above them. She focused her steel-blue eyes on the largest of the three. She held her crouch, arms out and balanced on the balls of her feet. The largest brigand's eyes crawled over her exposed flesh and the tight fit of her small leather garments. A perverted and grotesque smile split open his wide jaw exposing a few brown rotten teeth. The smile did not last.

Vrenna's blade flashed like lightning. She cut twice before any of the three brigands could move. Blood sprayed in a wide arc and the fat ropes of the first brigand's intestines fell from his splayed belly. Before the second brigand registered the attack, he felt the blade slide smoothly into his chest and out his back.

The last of the brigands, a small man no older than 18 with a thick crop of unkempt black hair, fell to his knees simultaneously begging and praying for his life. Vrenna swung hard and sent his head rolling across the dirt of the small camp. There was no mercy in the desert.

It was just before noon when the heavy door of Aulex's tavern opened and spilled in a blast of harsh light and hot air. A figure, obviously female and clothed in little but what appeared to be high-cut leather undergarments and a gray cloak, stepped in and closed the door. How a woman as beautiful as she dressed like that could walk the streets of Togaru and not be torn apart by the brigands, rapists, and murderers that infested these streets was beyond Aulex's understanding. When she pulled her cloak back, Aulex understood much more. The jeweled sword hanging on her hip, the far seeing look in her cold blue eyes, and the tattoo of three black horizontal diamonds on her neck spoke volumes of her skills before a single word left her lips.

She sat cross legged at one of the low tables of Aulex's tavern and tapped the rim of a dirty glass twice on the deeply scoured and scratched table. Aulex took over a jug of water and filled the glass.

Outside the racket had already begun. Two large groups of men gathered on opposite sides of the street. One group dressed in black and gray, while the other wore cloaks of crimson. Aulex ran over and bolted the inn's thick door. The woman took her glass, stood up, and walked to one of the inn's narrow windows.

Outside the two groups shouted at each other in a mix of three or four desert languages. Some drew swords or brandished crude axes. They rushed forward and retreated almost like dancers in some hideous tribal dance. They spat at each other and threw a handful of dirt. One of the black garbed men ran forward with a wild swing of his axe. His target scurried back slashing his sword in a mad and very inaccurate arc.

Dismay filled Aulex's lined face but a strange sound, a sound he had not heard in years, caught his ear. The woman was laughing. She continued to laugh as the groups continued their war dance. They waved their arms and swung their impotent weapons at one another. Occasionally one stepped forward with a wild attack before fleeing back into the protection of their group. Aulex feared the groups might hear the woman's laughter but their own wild cries and curses drowned her out.

One of the men scored a hit, throwing a spear into a thick huddle of sweaty bodies within the other mob. A man cried out and fell, blood squirting from a deep cut in his shoulder. Still the woman laughed and continued even as two more men fell to the wild throws of axes and arrows. Finally the two groups, continuing their curses and threats,

retreated back down the streets they came from. Still giggling, the ivory-skinned woman sat back down and sipped her drink.

"Every day they fight like that and every day more young men die." Aulex filled the woman's glass. "Ibris's funeral pyre across the street burns day and night now. The smoke of the dead stinks up the air and poisons the rain."

The woman kept her blue eyes fixed on the old barkeep as he spoke.

"They fight and die over nothing. Obaru's men fight for slave labor and Jeriko's gang fight for women but neither makes any gain. Nearly all of the young men join or are forced into the southern slave camps while all of the women fill Jeriko's brothel. Only old fools like me are left alone to give the emperor's inspector a fine show that our city is fine and functional. All he does is drink me out of drink until his three-cornered hat falls over his glazed eyes.

"My sister's son was killed earlier today just inside the town's walls. He was a good buy. He used to help me clean my bar before power, money, and the skin of young girls finally tore him away. He worked for Obaru, gathering slaves from the weaker farms and villages near by. A Jeriko thug chopped off his head and left it in the dirt just inside the walls this morning with two of his cruel and villainous friends. Jeriko already began hiring killers from the northern deserts to replace the dead men of this village. Soon the entire village will die."

The woman slipped a silver coin from an almost empty pouch at her belt and dropped it on the table. Aulex watched her walk out and down the street to Jeriko's mansion.

"She came this afternoon, after the battle. Vando and Ruben gave her the regular treatment. She's very pretty and Ruben did what Ruben does when he sees a pretty lady."

"What happened?"

"Vando lost his left arm, his sword arm, above the elbow."

"And Ruben?"

"He wasn't as lucky. His pieces were sent over to Ibris's crematorium."

"Ruben never did know when he was outmatched. Still, she killed him and maimed Vando? How badly was the woman hurt?"

"Not at all. They were both down in two cuts. It took her a little longer to cut up Ruben, I don't know what he said but it angered her."

"What did she want?"

"She wants to fight for us. She asked for double what we pay the rest of our men combined but from the way they talk about her, she's worth it."

"I'm not paying her that much. I'm not going to pay her at all. Who's our best man now?"

"Azeroth."

"Give her half of what she asked for. Tell her she will get the rest when that pig Obaru surrenders or dies. Tomorrow we fight. When she's done as much damage as we think she will do, have Azeroth and two others kill her. Then we get the money back and as many heads of Obaru's men as she's able to take."

"A brilliant plan, mistress."

"Where is she now?"

"Sophie tends to her."

"Excellent. Azeroth is on guard this eve, no?"

"He is."

"Tell him of our plans tomorrow morning."

Chills washed over Sophie's creamy skin but it was neither the night air nor her nakedness that caused it. The strange woman left the room nearly twenty minutes earlier. Sophie only received one order this eve: keep the woman in this room. Tend to her every need, every fancy, and every desire, but do not let her leave the room. Though she had tended many of the woman's needs, fancies, and desires, she failed to keep the icy-blue eyed swordswoman from leaving the room.

Sophie was the most skilled pleasure slave Jeriko owned, but neither her skills nor her beauty mattered if Jeriko found the woman missing. Jeriko would not hesitate to bind her hands and drop her into the barracks of the barbarians downstairs. They would rip her to pieces with a lust and violence she could never hope to survive.

The door slid open. The raven-haired woman slipped in on bare feet. She gave Sophie a cold passionless look. Sophie opened her mouth to speak but the woman pressed one long finger against the pleasure slave's full red lips. The woman had heard something out there in the mansion. She heard something and she was not pleased. The woman took her sword from the side of the large silk-lined bed and tied it to her back with a black leather strap. She bundled her gray cloak and, walking over to the window, threw it out into the night air.

Sophie gasped in dismay when she saw the woman's intention. She pressed her hands between her full breasts pleading for the woman to stop. The woman gave her another cold look and, in a single fluid motion, slipped silently out the window and into the night.

Cries of alarm woke Jeriko from a restful sleep. Her two pleasure slaves, both young supple girls of fifteen and sixteen, cried out from their own restful sleep nuzzled against their mistress's chest. Jeriko grabbed her black cloak and hood, not bothering to cover anything else, and rushed outside.

No one took notice of their mistress's nakedness. The sight at the door of her mansion demanded everyone's attention above all else. Three heads sat neatly on the ground, their milky eyes aimed up at the sky and purple tongues hanging down their scruffy chins. Their mutilated bodies lay in a heap to one side. Sinews of flesh, ropes of intestine, and thick rivers of blood spelled out a message on the ground in front of the three severed heads.

In her forty years of life, twenty as a slave girl herself and twenty as the mistress of the town's brothel, Jeriko never felt fear as strong as the fear she felt looking at those four simple words written in the mist grizzly of inks.

"The Price of Betrayal."

"Jeriko was never very good as a business woman. She was a much better whore. She should have stuck to what she knows. She considers us competitors but her thugs and trollops are nothing like us. Yes, I think her girls would be good for my house but I have over one thousand slaves in the desert. Kings will come to Togaru for their workforce or their armies. Will they go to Jeriko? Perhaps for an evening of sweat and a morning of disease, but when their bed play is over, they will come here.

"Jeriko showed her stupidity last night in her dealings with you. I am a professional. I will pay what you want and in exchange I want that whore mistress dead. She is weak now. Tomorrow we meet in the streets and we will finish them. For now, enjoy my hospitality. Rest well for tomorrow we destroy that bitch and what remains of her ragged band."

Daro Treeswinger looked up from the hand of Old Court he played with his friends, Jovef and Domino, to see the new woman stepping down the stairs on careful and balanced feet. She wore high leather boots, long black gloves, and very little else. Though quite attractive, Daro felt a sinking in his stomach instead of a throb in his trousers. He had heard of this woman's exploits though while surely exaggerated, Daro knew better than to underestimate her. It wasn't just his massive size and skill in battle that kept him alive. Daro knew when he was outmatched. Many years earlier, he abandoned a party hunting an ancient direwolf. His companions would have killed him if the wolf hadn't gotten them first. A few years later he bowed out of a duel, accepting humiliation and having to travel nearly two hundred miles east rather than fall to the twin axes of a smaller yet cunning gladiator in Tog Amen. Now, he saw the way the woman walked, the way her fingers brushed the hilt of her small jeweled sword, and he knew to get in her way meant death.

No order had been given to keep her in Obaru's mansion and no one would have enforced it if such an order had been given. The last men who stood in her way lost their heads. Daro, Jovef, and Domino watched her round buttocks and the small strap of leather that cut between them as she left the mansion. The sinking feeling in Daro's stomach remained.

"My mistress begs your forgiveness for her huge and stupid mistake. She knows no forgiveness can ever be answered but she offers this bag of gold, twice the payment you asked, as a sign of her apology.

"My mistress offers an equal sum for the head of Obaru tomorrow on the battlefield. With his men in battle, your chance to strike is guaranteed. My mistress has one card left to play tomorrow, one that will surely defeat Obaru's men in battle. Slay Obaru tomorrow and you leave Togaru a rich woman."

Gusts of hot wind blew over the massive walls that surrounded the village of corruption. Dark sunlight painted the sky and streets in a single sheet of desert orange. Dark figures stood silhouetted against the dust and grime of the streets. The two groups faced each other on opposite sides of the town's main path. The dust of the desert, sand mixed with the remains of beasts now thousands of years dead, washed out their features. Black smoke poured into the sky from Ibris's continually burning funeral pyre. Many more corpses would fuel that flame of the dead before the uncaring sun set over the edge of these desert wastes.

Thick shutters closed off every door and window of the few shops that sat on Togaru's streets. The owners of these modest shops and inns used the shutters as protection from the desert storm and the smoke of burning corpses. The shutters would remain closed even after the dust storm broke, for their owners knew that another storm would soon rage on the streets of Togaru.

Obaru, his fat body cloaked from head to foot in a scarlet robe, cloak, and hood, stood behind his men. Twenty strong men stood in front of their leader, their own scarlet cloaks held tight against the sandstorm. The huge Voth barbarian, Daro Treeswinger, led Obaru's gang. His thick muscled arm gripped the top of his massive warhammer studded with nails and glued broken glass. A steel helmet and smooth featureless faceplate covered his head and a thick leather collar wrapped around his throat. The rest of Obaru's men stood behind the massive barbarian, their own jagged axes, studded clubs, and hand-carved spears at the ready.

Vrenna, Obaru's other champion, stood next to the fat slavemaster with her own saber drawn and resting casually on her shoulder. Red dust clung to her black leather bustier and her black thigh-high boots. Her light blue eyes never left the shadowed group on the other side of the road.

The dust settled and the opposite group came into view. Obaru could make out the black-robed Jeriko standing behind her army. She wore her black cloak pushed back revealing long legs, a bare midsection, and the daring cleavage that made her so successful in her former occupation. Jewels shined off of the small alluring garments she wore. The sixteen men that stood between Obaru's army and the whore mistress bothered Obaru not at all, but the stranger on the whore's right was unknown to the slavemaster.

The man stood a head less than all of the other men around him and could not weigh more than a third of the huge barbarian, Daro. He wore a black sleeveless boiled leather breastplate scarred from dozens of cuts and a curved steel vambrace on his left shoulder. Gray breeches tucked into the top of glove-soft brown leather boots that looked older than their wearer. A long thin sword hilted in silver and jeweled with shining sapphires hung low on a wide belt around the man's waist. He wore his black hair in a long ponytail pulled back with a strap of laced leather. Burning green eyes pierced out from the man's scarred and unshaven face of a professional swordsman. A black tattoo of three diamonds stood out on the right side of the man's neck. A shiver ran across Obaru's skin and Jeriko smiled at him.

As the last sands of dust fell silent on the deserted street, Obaru's shrieking voice cut across the silence.

"Kill that whore!"

Like the crashing of a violent wave on sharp rock, the last battle of Togaru village began.

A huge hairy hulk wielding two jagged axes led Jeriko's gang into the center of Obaru's men like the point of a wedge. He held his right axe high with the simple plan of planting it in Daro's thick skull. That plan ended when Daro's spiked hammer crashed into the side of the huge man's head. The hairy hulk's head exploded like rotten melon in a cloud of bone, blood, and bits of brain that looked like pink shrimp.

The sounds of steel crashing against steel filled the walls of the small village. One man stabbed his spear through the stomach of another. Another man cut into the meaty thigh of his opponent with a huge meat cleaver. A third grabbed a young man by the hair and, tilting his head back, stabbed a long thin knife into his nose and deep into his brain.

Daro smashed his warhammer onto an old man's bare foot leaving the man screaming with a shattered stump spurting blood through a ruin of flesh. He felt the sting at his side when a short sword cut into him. He spun, putting his full weight behind a huge swing that shattered every one of the attacker's ribs. Through the raging battle, Daro saw a glimpse of Jeriko whispering to the small man at her side. The man drew his longsword in a motion as natural as breathing. Jeriko's men stepped out of the blademaster's way as he walked towards the hulking Daro.

Daro knew when he was outmatched. He knew his life would soon end on this street under the burning sun. Roaring a final cry to a long forgotten God of the Voth tribes, Daro raised his huge hammer and sent it crashing down towards the blademaster. The small man hopped backwards as the huge hammer dug a foot-deep pit in the street. The blademaster stepped up on the back of the hammer, hopped up onto Daro's huge shoulder with his other foot, and flipped completely over the Voth's head in a twisting arc. Daro had never seen anything like it and after witnessing such an acrobatic feat he was not surprised to see two sprays of blood explode from both sides of his throat underneath his leather collar. Daro fell to his knees, gasping for air that would not come. He turned and saw the swordsman spin and cut, opening up Jovef's belly. As Jovef's intestines fell into a pile on the dusty ground, the swordsman ran his sword in and out of Domino's thin chest with a perfect stab. Domino fell to his knees, his heart spurting blood into his lung and out of his mouth. His eyes met Daro's and the two men smiled.

"No more Old Court," they both mouthed to each other and then fell dead in the street.

Obaru watched dark-haired man as he danced through his Obaru's army leaving sprays of lifeblood and severed limbs in his wake. Ugin, a powerhouse of a man, swung a two-handed sword at the swordsman. The lithe swordsman swung his thin blade in a circle over the hilt of the much larger two-handed sword and cut off both of Ugin's thumbs. Borak, a professional murderer and rapist from the deep desert, stabbed at the dancing blademaster with a long dagger. The small man twisted into the force of the attack and sent Borak soaring head over heels through the air. Before Borak hit the ground, the blademaster's jeweled sword cut high into the air and severed the falling man's throat. Borak fell into a heap, blood gushing from his opened throat. Deep panic filled Obaru. No one could be that good, even the woman at his side. She was, however, his only hope.

"Kill him," Obaru squeaked.

Obaru saw her blue eyes turn towards him with an icy glare. A flash of light blinded the slavemaster like a bolt of lightning. He had just a second to understand the betrayal before his head rolled off of his fat body and onto the ground with a dull thud.

Jeriko cackled with glee, pressing her hands between her large breasts. She watched the lifeblood of her enemy pump into small rivers of crimson in the dark orange dirt of the street. The cries of the

dying echoed within the massive walls of the desert village. Only three stood unharmed on the town's main street.

The mercenary blademaster had cost Jeriko nearly half of her wealth but he was worth it. Nearly fifteen fell to his blade and only one remained. Jeriko's eyes met the ice-blue eyes of the leather-clad bitch who killed her men the night before. Jeriko smiled at her.

"Kill her!"

The small blademaster, covered head to toe in the blood of his enemies turned towards Jeriko and then looked back towards the raven-haired woman with the bloody saber in her hands. Both blademasters stared at each other for a long while. Jeriko's heart hammered in her chest as the moment wore long. Tension ran through the air like tight lines of steel. Wind blew at her robes and the thick main of her blond hair. Soon Jeriko understood.

A mental duel was taking place. Neither yet attacked but both of them visualized their moves like a game of king's castle. Attacks, counter-attacks, parries, reposts, and feigns all blurred between the eyes of the two blademasters. Tension drove Jeriko mad.

"Kill her!" Jeriko shrieked. She saw the barest hint of a smile touch the red lips of the raven-haired woman. Jeriko's eyes went wide as she began to understand. The deadly blademaster, the swordsman who cost her half of her fortune, turned towards her with the same small smile on his hard lips. Jeriko shrieked again as the swordsman stepped slowly towards her. Her shrieks did not last.

An hour passed before Aulex stepped out into the bloody street. Black birds, an oily mix of vulture and crow bred only in the deep desert, pecked at the rotting bodies laying splayed open under the hot sun. His breath left him when he saw the headless body of Obaru and again when he saw the tattered cloak of Jeriko. A sound caught his attention and he turned to the east gate of the massive walls. A small man dressed in black leather, gray trousers, and brown boots walked towards the gate. He led a desert pack mule laden down with hides of water, bulging purses of chiming gold coins, and a young voluptuous girl still dressed in the garb of a pleasure slave. Aulex turned towards the western gate and saw the deadly woman who entered his bar a day earlier. She had a waterskin slung over one shoulder and a bulging purse of gold slung over the other. She too headed for the gates out of Togaru.

Aulex looked again to the bodies laying in the street. The times of the slavemasters were over. Aulex smiled. Ibris's funeral pyre would burn bright this eve but perhaps in a few days it would dim and go out for good. Soon, a thousand freed slaves would come to Togaru. Aulex smiled again. Those slaves would need a drink. With a new spring in his step and a whistle on his lips, Aulex jogged back into his inn.

Author's Notes: Togaru is my first full-length Vrenna short story. I wrote it based on the seed of Yojimbo, the Kurosawa movie remade into "Fist Full of Dollars" with Clint Eastwood. It is a mess from the point-of-view and I thought that the two slave-lord armies got a lot more violent from the first battle to the last but I had a lot of fun with it.

The Demon Knight

Black smoke and the smell of cooking meat filled the dark room. Burning organs popped and sizzled above the monotone humming of the two cloaked figures. They stood at the edge of a pentagram of crushed bone and dried blood in a circle of fire. Blue flames burned from two large braziers to the sides of the circle.

Nervousness washed over Thath in waves, falling from his head down through his body to his stomach where it sat like a burning lump of coal. He had seen his master summon demons before but never one of this size or strength. Only the arch-wizard Gthaloz possessed enough strength to summon such a huge beast but Thath didn't know if even Gthaloz could keep one this large under control. Gthaloz stood confident, with his head held high.

Gthaloz stepped forward and held out a small skull of a child, still bloody. Gthaloz had slit the wailing child's throat with a long knife not three hours earlier. The child's organs now burned in the braziers of blue fire.

Gthaloz's chanting continued. The ring of flame grew. A small piercing red light shot out of the center of the circle to the room's arched ceiling. Slowly, the light widened, opening up a rippling pool of dark red liquid. Thath's heart pounded in his chest. He felt both dread and elation at the unholy sight. Sweat broke out over his pale skin and matted his gray hair to his scalp.

The pool opened up sixteen feet wide. Thath saw the shifting image of a burning landscape, black rocks, and heard the screams of inhuman beasts. He stared into the doorway of hell seeing what no mortal eyes had seen in thousands of years.

A hand, burning red and massive, exploded from the pool. It's black claws dug into the rock edge of the pentagram. The tendons, thick as rope, strained as the hand began to pull the rest of the body out of the shimmering dimensional pool.

Thath wanted to flee. The hand was horrible to look at. Only the company of Gthaloz kept him steady. Gthaloz was the greatest wizard in the known lands. If any could tame such a beast, it would be he.

Another huge hand roared out of the red pool and dug black claws into the stone floor. Gthaloz continued his chanting, his black staff in one hand and the child's skull in the other. Thath saw the tips of closed wings break out of the surface. Paralyzed in fear, he watched them grow out of the pool. The curved red dome of the beast's head flanked by two huge twisted horns thick as dead trees. Then the eyes broke the surface. Thath did not possess any telepathy or prescience but seeing those two horrible burning eyes gave him no doubt that he would die badly. No creature witnessing the drawing of such a fiend could expect old age and a clean death. To witness such a monstrosity meant damnation.

With a last mighty heave, the demon climbed out of the shimmering red pool bringing a mist of foul air that seemed to suck the breath out of Thath's lungs. He did not cough, however. To move at all would be disastrous. The demon roared in anger and victory. It turned its horrible eyes to the two dark-robed figures and smiled revealing sharp black teeth.

"Duke of Black Pits! We call upon you to serve us. We offer the blood of virgins to you. Drink full of it and accept our request."

The demon turned its huge head toward the burning braziers and narrowed its eyes. It turned its head back to Gthaloz. The arch-wizard's chin quivered and his eyes widened.

For ninety years, Gthaloz had summoned beasts from the depths. He commanded the most hideous creatures ever to step foot on this green world. His magic knew few limits and, though quite arrogant, Gthaloz was the best wizard Thath had ever heard of. Now Thath saw the burning eyes of the worst fiend he had ever seen. One look into those eyes and Thath saw a new truth. This was a mistake. Gthaloz had summoned a creature so powerful that the mightiest evil on the known earth would cower in its wake. Gthaloz had made the worst mistake of his long life and the whole world would pay for it.

The demon's claw shot out with surreal speed. The long nail on its thumb pierced through Gthaloz's stomach and the three nails on its fingers buried themselves in the wizard's spine. The arch-wizard screamed. The demon reached out and gripped Gthaloz with its other claw. The demon lifted the arch-wizard twenty feet into the air. The black staff and the child's skull fell to the floor. Standing with mouth agape, Thath heard the ripping of skin and the cracking of bone. The demon's shoulder muscles strained for a moment. In an explosion of blood and gore, the demon ripped the arch-wizard in half. Plump organs and ropes of intestines splashed in a pile on the stone floor. The demon released its grip and let the torn halves of the wizard fall into a wet heap. The demon smiled at the horrified expression on Thath's face.

Thath's eyes went from the piled remains of his master and back to the huge demon. He had been Gthaloz's apprentice for sixty years and most of those he had spent hating the cruel and arrogant wizard. He looked again at the piles of torn robes and flesh that had once been his mentor. Thath was not filled with pity or sadness but with envy. They released a great horror upon the earth and Thath knew that Gthaloz had received the fastest and most painless death any would receive from this creature. The demon would kill thousands more and Gthaloz's death would be the easiest.

A telepathic voice filled Thath's head, drowning out all other thought.

"Do you still request my aid?"

Calon awoke with a jolt. Every hair on his arms stood high. Sweat spotted his brow and matted his white hair to his head. He breathed in and exhaled a lung-full of air in a long stream. Calon stat up and got to his feet. He stepped into a pair of rough cloth breeches and tied them in the front. Calon put a piece of twine in his mouth and ran his fingers back through his hair. He pulled it into a pony tail and tied it with the twine.

Calon's thoughts returned to his dream. He did not normally dream. Dreams like this came to him in the past, but it had been over twenty years since the last one and Calon hoped that those had been his last. They weren't.

His chest burned when he thought about those days and his fingers traced the crease of a jagged scar in the center of his ribcage. A flood of memories swept over Calon and he couldn't shut it off before the most painful came. He saw Aulania looking at him with pale blue eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, I love you perhaps, but only blood came out. A lot of blood.

Calon shook his head, shaking the images away. He sat back on his bead and pulled on a pair of soft leather boots. He loved those boots. They served him for decades with no sign of ever falling apart. They were the only possession of his life he still owned before the wars ended.

Calon had much to do this day, he thought to himself. He had little time for pontificating dark dreams. Those dreams could be anything. It could have been a bad bowl of soup. He was older now and his mind sometimes slipped. Perhaps this too was just a slip. Calon pulled a light gray tunic over his head and tied a rope belt around his waist. He left his small home hoping to leave the dreams behind him. He did not succeed.

Thath hadn't slept in days. His skin sagged over his bones like a wet robe. Black rings circled his sunken eyes. In three days he had aged nearly ten years. The summoning room had changed in that time as well. Though the decaying corpse of his master lay where it fell, festering and squirming with maggots, the demon took great interest in building the room into his own personal sanctum. He crushed rock from the walls and dug into the floor creating a grotesque mound where he sat and grinned. He had scratched his own arcane circles into the stone floor in a script alien and horrible.

"Your tower's guard has a captain. Bring him here." The demon's voice tore through Thath's conscious thoughts. Thath knew that the great demon heard any thought of sadness, pain, or betrayal in the wizard's mind but the demon cared little. He just grinned at Thath and sent instructions. Thath always obeyed.

Garoulin Doublehilt served the Klatharan armies for nearly fifteen years. The tall proud guard stepped easily into the doors but the sight of the horrible demon sitting on the mound of broken rock sent his eyes wide and sweat broke out on his brow. Thath enjoyed the sight of the flustered guard immensely. He was no longer alone with the thing. The demon sent Thath away. Thath returned to his study and attempted to sleep but the sounds of tearing and screaming within the summoning hall below and the dreams of that terrible red-skied world he glimpsed in the summoning circle broke any hopes of rest.

When he returned, Thath witnessed a sight even worse than the grizzly death of his master. Thath saw Garoulin's naked body stretched across one of the demon's circles. His skin was flayed open and his organs burned in one of the stone braziers. The demon held a ball of molten rock in his hand. The demon stuffed this molten rock into the center of Garoulin's open chest where his heart should have been. Then the demon lifted the three hundred pound stone brazier and poured a black liquid into the open chest. Thath saw the glowing rock heart begin to pulse and pump the black liquid through the veins in Garoulin's gray skin. The body jumped and Thath felt the last edge of his sanity slip away. Thath saw Garoulin's eyes open revealing pools of molten lava that exploded into piercing beams of white light. Thath knew that any sign of the captain was long gone. This horror was something new, a child of the demon, a hell knight.

"You look tired." Calon didn't have to turn around to recognize the owner of the raspy voice that greeted him when he entered the small alehouse known to the villagers of Nimbul as the White Rock Inn. Calon knew the priest, Thalam Jorinserg, for twenty years. Thalam sat at one of the inn's four tables sipping a cup of dark beer. Garn, the alemaster, poured another glass of beer and brought it to Calon as he sat down at Thalam's table.

"What troubles you, my friend? Are the crops still wary to grow in this damp month?" Thalam smiled but his smile fell when he saw the grave look on Calon's face. "What is wrong?"

"I had dreams the last six nights." Thalam's mouth opened but he did not reply. He knew the rarity of Calon's dreams and knew what it meant when he had them. "A demon is loose in the lands. A big one."

"Are you sure?" Thalam knew the answer to his own question before the words left his mouth. "The Klatharan haven't summoned such beasts in almost twenty years."

"I'm sure."

Calon looked into his dark mug of beer. Neither man spoke. Thalam raised his mug and drank the remains of its contents in one gulp. He exhaled slowly.

"Will you go after it?"

"I suppose I have to. It will drive me mad if I do not."

Thalam looked at his longtime friend with somber eyes before changing the subject. "Is it where you left it?"

"I would know if someone moved it." Thalam supposed that was true as well. His eyes went to Calon's white hair, hair that used to be black many years ago.

"If God wills you to find it, than find it you must."

Calon could not hide the agitation in his voice. "I did not ask for this, Thalam."

"You are a hero, Calon. Heroes are chosen by God. She gave it to you and with it you saved Nimbul and her people. You were its chosen wielder and you fought with God at your back. You fought harder and

with greater skill than any other."

"I was fifteen years old. I was a child. I wanted none of that and I want none of this. I want to live my life and farm my crop."

"You must do what you were chosen to do."

Calon heard Aulania scream in the back of his mind. His hand went to the scar under his tunic.

"When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"God's speed, my friend."

The words rang hollow in Calon's ears. He heard God's voice before and he wished not to hear it again. He finished his drink and left the bar before heading home to pack his provisions for the following morning's journey. He never saw Thalam again.

Calon left before dawn. He saddled the better of his two horses, a mare named Moonbeam. Calon packed a few changes of clothes, a bedroll, and a rusted iron sword he kept behind his bed. He took a look over the farm he would soon leave behind. In two weeks it would begin to grow over and in four, weeds would infest the crops and he wouldn't be able to set them back straight for another year.

For a moment, Calon thought about putting Moonbeam back in her stall. He couldn't abandon his farm, run off to be a hero, and expect people to feed him when he returned. Flashes of fire and blood filled his mind again. He wouldn't eat at all if the dreams kept on the way they had. With a final look and a deep breath, Calon threw his leg over the saddle and set his leather boots into the stirrups. He walked Moonbeam slowly out of town pulling his wool hood over his head. When he reached the open road he kicked Moonbeam into a gallop.

Five nights later Calon had traveled nearly one hundred miles from the town of Nimbul. He passed a few farms and visited two inns on the way, picking up fresh food and filling his water skins. On the fifth night another dream flooded his sleep with blood. He saw the rending of claws through innocent smooth flesh. He saw children scream as blood poured out of their bodies. He saw burning eyes cutting through billowing black smoke. He awoke in the midlde of the night with sweat pasting his clothes to his skin.

On the fifth night after Calon's departure, hell found the town of Nimbul. The door of the White Rock Inn crashed inwards bringing a foul and cold wind to the patrons of the tavern. A black-cloaked figure stood massive in the doorway. His eyes burned with white fire. The mud of one thousand miles of uninterrupted travel caked his tall leather boots tipped and heeled in steel. He shook his mop of black hair tied back in a loose ponytail. Gray steel armor peeked out from under the black cloak. A sword hung low on the figure's hip hilted in onyx and crossed with a hand-guard in the shape of batwings. A skull, eyes of fire rubies, screamed up from the end of the sword's hilt.

The cloaked figure crossed the bar's floor in four steps and stood at the bar in front of the tavern keeper, Garn. Gerald, the tavern's best customer sat up at the bar next to the place where the shadowed figure stood. Garn's eyes widened when he saw the decaying gray skin of this traveler and his blazing eyes. Small maggots wormed out of tiny holes in the man's face. Veins of black spidered across every inch of exposed skin. The stench of decay flowed from the man's rotten mouth. Garn knew he was looking at a dead man but the burning white eyes spoke of something hideously alive.

"May I help..."

"I seek a man with white hair, a farmer but once a hero of this town. Where is he? Lie to me and you die." The hell knight's voice rumbled in Garn's chest. As he watched, the hell knight's eyes shifted from blazing white to pools of burning red lava pulsing and flowing in their decayed sockets. Garn smelled burning flesh.

"I don..."

No one in the bar saw exactly what happened. The cloaked figure stood in front of the barkeep one moment and in the next his arm was extended out horizontally with his black onyx blade pointed towards the door. Garn's severed head smashed into a line of bottles behind the bar. His headless body gushed blood over the hell knight's unmoving body. Most of the patron's stood with their mouths hanging open. Young Regold, the sixteen year old stable boy, vomited his last meal of roast mutton. The hell knight turned to Gerald who still sat at the bar, his own mouth hanging open.

"Where is he?" The hell knight's molten eyes blazed.

"I"

The black sword slashed low and Gerald's intestines spilled from his ample belly onto the hardwood floor.

"WHERE IS HE!"

Three farmers who accepted the town's copper to act as constables drew the iron short swords that hung at their sides. Two of them had never drawn them in combat before and nervous energy squeezed them like tight springs. One of them, young Vand, stepped forward and drew his blade. The hell knight matched Vand's step forward with his own long stride. Vand cried out and attacked with a single overhand stride thinking of his father's battles in wars long ago. He expected the hell knight to parry the blow but the black sword twisted under the swing, cut off Vand's sword arm just above the elbow, and sent it sailing in a bloody spiral across the room. Vand had no time to register the mortal wound before the black blade came down hard and cleaved the young farmer open from shoulder to hip.

Another of the three farmers came in from the side hoping to flank the dark murderer. The hell knight's gauntleted fist smashed in the farmer's face breaking his nose, jaw, and most of his teeth. The farmer never felt the blade pierce his heart a second later.

Felnar, the last standing elected constable, saw his friends laying dead on the wooden floor. He saw the hell knight's blood lust in full. He stood with the small iron sword quivering in his hand.

A door to the back room of the inn opened and Garn's older daughter came out, a look of confusion and then horror crossing her face. The hell knight whirled around, his cloak billowing out behind him, and in one heavy swing he cut the young girl in half at the waist. She fell in two pieces onto the floor within an ocean of blood and gore.

Felnar took his chance. He rushed in and stabbed hard. The blade sunk deep. The hell knight grabbed the swords hilt and twisted. The iron blade shattered. Faster than Felnar could flee, the hell knight grabbed him by the throat and held him close.

"WHERE!"

Heat flowed into Felnar's body. He felt his blood begin to boil. He felt his organs burst. One of his eyes exploded in his head. He tried to screamed but only black smoke poured out of his throat. His skin burned, cracked, and slid off of his muscles and bones. His heart exploded and his singed corpse fell to the ground.

Fifteen people spent their evening in the White Stone inn that night. Four made it out. It took the hell knight six minutes to kill the other eleven. It took him another two hours to kill sixty more people in the town's proper.

By dawn, every one of the villagers of Nimbul was dead.

Calon continued to ride west. Moonbeam held a good pace, nearly twenty miles a day, and would have taken him to the eastern shores had he continued his direction for another six hundred miles. That assumed he wasn't murdered by highwaymen.

He turned on the sixth day and headed another fifteen miles along a farmer's path. The path had been wider when he traveled along it two decades before. He had traveled the opposite way back then and every step away had taken half the weight of the world off of his shoulders. Now each step put that load back on. Dread filled him the further he rode; the closer he came.

He found the path at the standing stones as he remembered it. The column of natural sandstone stood tall and proud as it had for thousands of years. Calon let Moonbeam free at a nearby brook. The horse would stay there munching on grass, relaxing in the sun, and drinking the clear water of the brook for the four days it would take him to walk into and hopefully out of the woods.

Calon tied his light gray cloak around his neck and clasped it with a gold circle his mother gave him twenty five years earlier, four years before Klatharan troops had raped and killed her. He tied his leather boots tight and tucked a dagger into the folded leather at the top of his right boot. He slung a pack with bread, meat, and light bedding over his shoulder and began his hike deeper in the wood.

He found the cave on the afternoon of his second day into the woods. A thick web of ivy and weeds covered its entrance. It looked like the open mouth of a corpse buried under webs and crawling with tendrils of rot. He tore open an entrance and stepped into the dank cave. Wind pulsed out of the cave like soft breath, bringing the smell of stale air to Calon's nose. No birds chirped; no insects chattered. They knew what lay in the cave and they knew it was best left alone.

Calon had no such luxury.

Calon took out his flint and wrapped an oiled rag around a thick stick. He lit the torch on his third spark and held it high. His torchlight flickered off of old rock carved from a tiny stream now dried up. He peered back at the cave's mouth seeing that dusk fell over the woods outside. This was his last chance for peace, he knew. He could turn back now and head home. He could abandon this foolish journey and return to his small farm.

A slice of pain stabbed into his head. An explosion of molten rock and blood filled his vision. Calon saw burning eyes and thick red skin. He heard a child scream. Not the whine of hunger or unworked frustration most children wailed but a scream of horror and pain. The scream cut off with a wet crunch. Deep laughing throbbed in Calon's head.

His vision returned to the cave and all he heard was silence. He had no choice. There was no returning home. A demon walked the earth and only he knew how to stop it.

Wind whipped at Calon's torch. Cobwebs burst into tiny flashes as the flame touched them. Calon traveled right, then left, then right as forks split the cave into two, four, and eight paths. Calon didn't think. His feet knew the way and guided him as they had in the past.

The cave's walls and floor shifted from natural dirt and stone to rock carved by human hands. The floor smoothed out. Carvings lined the walls though unrecognizable from decades of dirt and cobwebs. The cave ended at a huge stone wall, ominous and completely blank. Calon pulled off one leather glove and placed his hand on the wall. He felt the cold and rough wall under his hand and then felt it shift. A deep rumbling of counterweights behind the walls shook the whole cave. Dust fell from the ceiling. The door slid into the wall and a thick gust of air blew past him and into the vacuum within the room ahead.

No cobwebs filled the crypt. It sat almost exactly as Calon had left it. Large jars of ashes lined the crypt's floor. Carvings of battles and kings sat untouched on the stone walls. None of this made any impact on Calon. One object demanded his full attention.

It sat like a bolt of frozen lightning on the stone pedestal in the center of the room. Its ancient makers forged it from a single bar of unknown metal hard enough to keep an edge sharp in centuries of battle but flexible enough to keep it from ever shattering.

It was neither sword nor spear but something in between. Its handle stretched nearly a meter with a long blade just as long protruding from an ornate guard shaped like angel's wings. The blade was straight with a sharp point and a gleaming tempered edge. Dark red leather wrapped the shaft and a single black spike sat on its end.

Calon remembered the tale well of the trapped demon the priests and wizards had used in the creation of the weapon. The demon's fire forged the metal. Its flayed skin wrapped the handle. One great black

tooth capped the weapon's long hilt. It was not the demon's fire that Calon feared, nor was it the source of the weapon's power. It was the spirit within it.

Calon looked down and saw a skeleton locked in a silent scream laying next to the stone alter. It sat propped up on one hand, the other reaching towards the spear. The reaching arm ended halfway towards the shoulder with a ruin of splintered bone. The skeleton's arm had exploded. Calon looked at the spear. It glimmered in the torchlight. Before he could talk himself out of it, Calon reached out and picked up the spear.

A shock of electricity both horrifying and exhilarating flooded through Calon's arm spreading out throughout his body. Light filled the crypt.

A figure stepped forward seeming to form out of thin air. White flowing silk cloaked his tall body. His total blue eyes shined like an empty sky. His face was clean and perfect with a white mane of hair flowing down his back. He was a being more beautiful than any man or woman Calon ever saw. Even now Calon gasped.

While the demon roared in pain, spiked to a wall with its skin flayed open revealing cords of thick muscle and black bone, the priests forging this weapon called another being from the outer worlds. An Archon of justice answered the call. It flowed into the forged weapon and cooled it into perfection. The demon, seared by the power and light of the Archon's possession, withered into ash. The weapon was complete and those who would wield it would serve the Archon within. All who possessed this weapon would serve this weapon. Now Calon served it. The Archon's blue eyes burned into Calon's soul and it spoke in a voice both beautiful and terrible.

"You got fat."

Calon took a day and a half of brisk hiking to reach the cave but it only took him five hours to return to the path where Moonbeam grazed. Every muscle in his body screamed but the spear did not let him stop. As darkness grew, Calon collapsed in his small camp and slept six hours before the Archon called him.

"Awaken. We travel soon." The white robed figure of the Archon stood tall above Calon's body, curled and agonized from sore muscles.

"Why was the dead man in your crypt?" Calon opened his eyes but lay still. To even breathe shot pain throughout his body.

"You left me there for twenty years. Do you know what it is like to sit unable to do what you must do for that long?"

"Yes." Calon's eyes blazed and he forced himself to sit up.

"I suppose you do."

"It took a month to call him to me. He was an adulterer and rapist. He killed another boy when he was twelve years old. He rode past and I called him. He found me and he reached for me and I gave him what he deserved."

Calon shivered and cast his eyes away from the divine figure. He imagined the white explosion of blood and muscle and bone. He imagined the screams of the doomed man as he died inches away from the most powerful weapon known in the lands.

"Enough. We move." The Archon's voice cut into Calon's head. Calon gritted his teeth and placed his hand on the spear. Fresh energy forced him to his feet. He heard his muscles crack but felt no pain.

"Leave the horse. We travel on foot."

That evening darkness raced along the roads. Twin beams of white light flashed across the road as the hell knight chased his prey. The blood of two hundred men, women, and children stained his armor and skin. A dark splash of red blood covered half of his face. White fangs gleamed in the hell knight's grimace. His prey was near.

Molten steel heated where his heart should have been. Black fire flowed like liquid through his veins. The muscles in his legs pumped like massive pistons in a diabolical machine. The hell knight's fury crushed all knowledge of life as anything but a vehicle of hate and war. His black sword sat on his back covered in the blood of innocents.

The eyes of the hell knight shifted from blazing white to the dark orange of molten shifting rock. The black-red vision of the hell knight focused. He saw something.

It was a camp site for one person and no mount. The small logs of a fire still smoldered. He was less than a day behind.

In the darkness, a flash of white sharp teeth gleamed out as the hell knight grinned. In thirty hours the red blood of the white-haired farmer would drip down his throat. His master would be pleased with him. The hell knight ran on hard into the knight.

"You left me. You left me in that cave to rot. Why?"

Calon's fire burned low. Exhaustion filled every cell of his body. The spear lay propped up on a log, point to the sky. Calon poked at the fire with a stick and put pieces of tasteless meat into his mouth. The Archon stood tall and cold on the opposite side of the fire. Calon could see the dark trees through the Archon's translucent body.

"I didn't want to fight anymore," Calon spoke quietly. "I wanted a normal life. I wanted to work on a farm. I wanted to fall in love and marry. I wanted children to raise."

"How well did that work?" The Archon's voice was melodic and chilling.

"It didn't." Calon's eyes moved to the fire. "The dreams never stopped."

"They never will. You are weak and flawed but you see what others cannot. You saw what creatures crawl out of the pits. You saw what can become of man. You know what you are and you know what you must do."

Memories long buried dug into Calon's vision. He saw men crying to the arch dukes of hell in elation as they cut open their own wailing children. He saw young women rip open their own mothers and drink their blood. He saw murder and incest and rage and lust.

"No!"

"No?" The Archon laughed. "You deny what they were? You deny what they are? You were young when I found you and even you had already twisted. You lusted after your own blood. You murdered your neighbor's dog for the sheer joy of it. You reveled in sin. Had there been one more pure around, I would have killed you as I killed the others."

Hate filled Calon's eyes. He hated the weapon. He hated the smug half-grin on the Archon's face.

"Remember who you are. Remember what you are. Remember what all of you are and then we can do what we were meant to do."

"Go to hell."

The Archon laughed.

"In time. But first we must get hell off of this world. Or have you forgotten?"

A scream filled Calon's head and he saw a woman, beautiful and naked, her skin glistening pale in the firelight. Her hands were bound to two black pillars and chains bound her feet to the stone floor. Lines of lashes criss-crossed her beautiful body. Large streams of tears fell across her ivory face and red lips. Above her towered the demon. It was no minor minion of hell, no mephit or devil, but one of the true demon lords. Its black wings spread out forty feet. Its cloven hooves crushed stone under its weight. It grinned with black glistening teeth. The demon shot forward and the woman exploded in a shower of bright red blood. An arm still hung from one of the pillars. The demon closed its powerful jaws and filled the hall with the sound of crunching bone.

The vision shattered. Calon looked into the face of the Archon with revulsion and fury. Fury turned to confusion when Calon saw the Archon's attention had shifted behind him. In a flash of light, the spirit of the spear was gone. Calon turned. Death stood behind him.

The hell knight stood unmoving in the moonlight. His figure was a black contrast, a hole in the world, to the light around it. Not a lick of firelight reflected off of his charred skin. Only two slits of burning fire told Calon that he wasn't looking at a shadow.

The knight held his black blade, its point dug into the earth. It raised its hand forward and beckoned Calon to come forward. Calon took two careful steps back and picked up the spear. White sharp teeth glistened as the hell knight grinned. In an explosion of movement, the hell knight charged.

Calon managed to get the spear up a split second before the hell knight's blade would have taken off his head. The black sword crashed against the shaft of the spear, sending earthquakes of pain through Calon's arms. The hell knight's knee exploded into Calon's groin. As he doubled over in pain and nausia, the hell knight's steel gauntleted fist smashed into Calon's nose and mouth.

Blood gushed from Calon's ruined nose. His teeth mashed against his lips, tearing nearly all the way through. Two of those teeth shattered and fell out in a river of blood. Calon's legs gave out and he fell backwards in the cold of shock.

"Get up."

The voice of the Archon came smooth and strict. Calon's vision narrowed as he saw the demon knight step forward and kick him in the face. The steel toe of the hell knight's boot cracked the bone above Calon's left eye and tore a gash nearly five inches long around his eye socket. The eye swelled shut and blood poured down Calon's face. He squinted and felt bones in his face move where they should not. He was sure he was going to die. He wanted to die. He heard laughter like rusted steel behind him.

"Turn. Throw."

Calon wanted to lie there in the mud and let the cool blade of the demon knight rip through his chest. He wanted his head separated from his body so all of this would end. He received neither. The voice of the Archon commanded his body. He pushed himself to his stomach and vomited an ocean of dark blood. His hands grasped out; he felt something cool in the mud. He grabbed it with fingers that were not his own. He rolled to his back and threw hard.

The spear cut through the air like an arc of lightning and buried itself deep into the hell knight's chest. The tip tore through the beast's unholy molten-rock heart. Bolts of white fire and electricity raked through its black veins and burst from the hell knight's eyes, nose, and mouth, illuminating the night into day. The hell knight grasped the white shaft and howled. The cry reached the ears and minds of every creature with a brain within a mile. Anything smaller than a fox fell over dead. Anything larger went mad and never recovered. The demon knight pulled the spear from his heart and crashed dead to the ground in a smoldering charred heap.

Calon fell unconscious.

It was the worst night of Calon's life. Throughout the night and following day, energy flowed from the spear into Calon's broken body. The bones in his face twisted and cracked. His muscles ripped and regrew. Pink skin filled in the torn wounds building a webwork of scars on Calon's face. His body twisted and convulsed in pain but the roar in his mind was far worse.

He heard his father's voice slurred with pints of ale.

"I should have left you to die."

"No!" Calon's young voice cracked.

"Your sister fell sick and died because we had to feed you." His mother's voice was soft but horribly cruel. Her words tore Calon's heart out of his chest. Tears fell down his young cheeks.

"You weren't fast enough to save them." Calon saw a black-winged demon tearing over Calon's childhood village. He watched in paralyzed horror as it swooped low, turned its head, and bit off the head of Calon's fleeing grandfather without slowing down.

"It happened again, too. You delayed and you left me in that cave and look what happened." Calon saw the hell knight rip through the people of Nimbul. He saw his friends, old farmers and tradesmen, explode into clouds of blood. He saw Bethany, the town's plump tailor, get cut down, the demon knight's black blade cutting off both of her legs at the thigh.

Calon cried in agony as he saw the hell knight cut Thalam the priest wide open from the top of his head to the middle of his chest.

All night the cries of the villagers from Calon's childhood and retirement tore over Calon's mind.

He awoke twenty hours later. His eyes opened revealing two orbs of blue fire. His mouth opened up in a scowl of pain and fury. All hesitation, all apprehension, all sympathy, and all guilt were gone. Calon was gone. Only the Archon's Knight remained.

The sun set as the Archon's Knight raced towards the tower of the demon.

The Archon did not speak. The Archon did not need to. When Calon walked into the dead lands surrounding the demon's tower, his leather boots crushing loose plates of shale, he was a man transformed. He held the spear tight. He clenched his rebuilt jaw.

Black and red clouds rushed over the dead sky. Bolts of silent lightning splintered in the dark. Not a single sprout of vegetation lived in these barren lands.

Calon felt no dread as he climbed up the hills of stone and clay that ridged the flat plains around the tower. He stared forward with determined eyes at the black spire as its tip appeared over the ridge.

The black tower rose out of the dead lands. It stood seven hundred feet high in stark contrast to the world around it. Five pointed spires clawed out to the heavens. Stone creatures beyond the known horrors of man sat on ledges and spires. Red smoke poured from tall windows. The hands of ten thousand men built it nearly two thousand years previous for a dead and long forgotten queen of Avronithea. Now the demon twisted it into a pillar from another world, a dark world of chaos and fire and blood.

Calon felt no fear when his eyes followed the tower down to the plain; down to where the hell knights waited for him.

There were not one dozen of them, nor two score of them, but one hundred black armored warriors of the abyss. They were an army able to rip through a thousand, ten thousand, mortal soldiers of the neighboring kingdoms. The demon lord would send them to the corners of the earth leaving a cloud of death in their wake. They would slaughter every man, woman, and child that ever dared to stand in their way.

They stood silent, their red eyes of molten steel narrowed as they watched him descend the ridge. They bared their white fangs and gripped their black swords, barbed spears, wide axes, and spiked maces. Black armor, spiked and scaled with razor sharp ridges, held their hatred tight within their burned and ruined bodies. Hearts of molten-rock beat black fluid through their veins. Each one of them stood twisted and forged from the men they once were into the war machines of the demon lord.

Only one stood in their way.

Calon looked at the demon's army without any emotion. They scared him not at all. His eyes looked past the army to the creature behind them. The demon lord watched with red burning eyes, his black wings curled around his body.

Calon stepped down to the plain below and approached the army unblinking. Then battle exploded in a flash of white against a cloud of black.

A group of four advanced, their weapons high and a dark cry on their charred cracked lips. Calon swung the blade of the spear horizontally and two screaming heads spun off into the night. The spear parried a black sword meant to sever Calon's throat. The blade exploded into shards of onyx. The top of the spear punctured the blade swinger's chest. The swinger vomited a river of black blood into the night air. The fourth attacker reared back to stab hard with his barbed spear but never had a chance. The spear rammed through one orange burning eye and out the back of the hell knight's horned helmet.

Calon pulled his spear free and turned to the remaining army. He saw not the fury or anger of the other demon knights, but fear. Never had the knights seen such fury. Within their chests beat hearts of blackness but now they faced something worse than themselves.

The demon roared and a dozen of the knights rushed in. In twelve seconds every one of them died. The demon roared again and the remaining army attacked at once.

None could describe the battle that followed. A sea of blackness fell into a burning white fire in the center. The black shadows exploded into fury. Hands, heads, feet, and bodies littered the ground. The spear hungered for the black blood of the abyss and it received much. The last twenty knights attacked all at once. Calon stabbed the spear into the ground. An eruption of light rolled out like a wave, crushing the knights and blowing them apart like paper. The knights lay on the ground in a black circle. They were in pieces. Calon stood like a white apex in a fallen black wheel. The spear hummed with power in his hand.

The demon lord stood ready.

"All of this time I thought it had been lost." The demon's powerful voice pounded into Calon's head but the Archon's knight stood fast. "I sent my minion to find it, to find you, but he failed me. They all failed me." The demon smiled his rows of black fangs. "You did not."

The demon raised one arm and opened his hand palm up towards Calon. "Come to me."

"NO!" The Archon shrieked. Calon turned and beheld the wispy visage of the spear's spirit. "Take the spear and slay him!"

"He is no different than you." Calon's voice was calm and reasoned. "He slays children. You made me slay children. He kills. You forced me to kill. I was free. I was a farmer. I had a life. I had friends. You took that from me."

Black blood dripped from the spear's blade.

"Now I am nothing. I am a weapon. You made me into a weapon and so I strike."

Calon threw the spear. It did not pass through the translucent spirit but struck hard. The spirit fell backwards, a fountain of blood exploding from his chest and mouth. The white aura faded. All that was left was the husk of an old man and a spear, black as night and burning with red fire.

Behind the demon, deep in the black tower, a portal burned in the floor. A liquid of blood reflected worlds of fire and ash. Islands of rock floated in voids of sulphuric air. Acidic rain pounded on the black hides of beasts of unimaginable horror.

"Come General." The demon lord's voice filled Calon's head with warmth and energy. "We have worlds to conquer."

Author's Note: The end of Demon Knight surprised even I. I thought he'd go there and kick the demon's ass back to hell. Some of the scenes in this story I really like such as the horrific bar fight and the fight between the Demon Knight and Calon. This was my purest form of dark fantasy and I don't expect to go back there real soon.

The King's Man

Sulan fell hard to the packed dirt, feeling her wrist twist. Bolts of pain shot up her arm and she cried out. All around her shadowed by the

moonless night and illuminated red by the camp's fire stood four huge orcs. They looked at her without emotion. They did not speak. She had watched these four orcs break into her home, behead her father and cut down her mother and younger brother. They said nothing when they attacked and didn't seem interested in anything but her. They had thrown a hood over her head and hadn't taken it off until now.

Sulan trembled in a fear she had never known in her whole life. She had seen orcs before when they had come, fired arrows at their house, and stolen their livestock, but they were nothing like these. These orcs were different.

"What do you want?" Sulan's voice cracked. The orcs made no reply. They continued to look at her as they would a dead thing. She climbed to her feet being careful to avoid her sprained wrist. Her nightshirt hung in rags around her pale skin and she held it to her in an illusion of modesty and protection.

"I want you." The voice was deep and clear. Sulan's bones vibrated on the last word. Two of the orcs stepped to the side and a pair of red eyes blazed behind them. A dark figure approached the camp from the deep woods. The fire blazed for a moment and then went dark. Far away, a wolf howled. It was the only sound Sulan heard.

The figure grew as it approached Sulan. He was huge. If he was an orc, he was the most horrible orc Sulan had ever seen. He stood almost seven feet tall. His skin was thick and the color of ash. His plate armor, dyed dark red, was molded around his massive muscles. Scars of evil glyphs and runes lined his exposed arms and face. A giant sword hilt appeared over his left shoulder, black and ugly. His red eyes blazed again.

"I need you." The orc spoke with the same powerful voice, but Sulan found it strangely soothing. Her legs turned to straw. How could she resist such a powerful force? She was helpless to defeat this massive beast. She would die horribly and painfully. When the orc approached her, she didn't even raise her hands. Her nightshirt fell to the ground in front of her in tattered rags.

For a moment there was no movement or sound. The orcs continued to stare at her. Sulan's looked at the massive orc in front of her with eyes of opaque glass. There was an explosion of motion faster than any eyes could see. The orc was upon her.

It was late in the night, ten days after the villagers discovered Sulan's family murdered, when the king's man came to Charb. He entered the Dancing Doe with his cloak pulled over his face to protect him from the chilled autumn winds. His cloak whipped around him with the cold wind he brought inside and the few patrons of the Doe seemed to shrink under the biting chill.

Every eye turned towards the stranger as he closed the door and cut off the howling wind. He stood tall as he pulled back the hood of his cloak and surveyed the room. No one missed the shining breastplate and the ornate sword that hung heavy on the stranger's side.

The Dancing Doe was the second oldest building in Charb next to the town's hall. Over ten thousand ales had crossed its bar, many spilled in haughty laughter over the thick oak tables and onto the boarded floor. On a normal night the bar served thirty to fifty of the farmers and tradesmen of the small village. This cold night brought only ten.

Darus had seen hundreds of other taverns like this one speckled across the kingdom's many small villages, but there were a few differences. A large stuffed deer stood on its hind legs in the far corner of the room. Someone had placed a guardsman's helmet, a silver pointed bullet-helm, on top of its head between its large ears. Darus smiled at it. The smell of burning wood and the warmth of the tavern took days off of his journey even if the stares of the tavern's patrons were colder than the night outside. Darus approached the bar.

"Evening, sir," said Jorn, the barkeep. He had as good a knack for looking relaxed as any Darus had seen. "What can I get for ya?"

"I will need a room, sir." The stranger's voice was pleasant, even, and relaxed with no sign of an accent. It seemed to disarm the rest of the patrons who began whispering amongst themselves though their eyes crept back to the stranger from time to time. "I also have a mount in need of tending and a plate of whatever is creating that heavenly smell."

Jorn smiled and turned to the two wide eyed children who stood at the doorway of the tavern's kitchen. He snapped his fingers three times. When the children didn't move, he threw his rag, his main prop in his role as relaxed-barkeep, at them. One had Jorn's dark brown eyes and bushy hair. The other, a young girl of twelve, resembled her father little. A good thing, thought Darus. When he turned back to Darus, the girl stuck her tongue out at the large man before her

brother yanked her into the tavern's kitchen.

"What brings ye to town?" said Jorn, suddenly aware that he had threw his only rag at his only son. He stepped over and fetched it from the floor.

"I came from Kallad. The king sent me to look into the orc problem." Jorn looked hard at the stranger, his rag forgotten in his hand.

"I mean no disrespect, sir, but it's a bit more than 'an orc problem'." Jorn leaned on both hands and bent towards the stranger. His thick arms flexed under his gray shirt. "A family of the finest farmers we had was torn apart. When we sent word to the king, we expected a bit more than one man."

"I will do what I can to help, friend. If more are needed, they shall come. For now," Darus moved his eyes up from his drink and met Jorn's stern gaze. "You have me."

News of the stranger's arrival traveled fast. Some referred to him simply as "the stranger. Others as "agent of the king". Young Forlen, son of Jarn the barkeep, was the only one who knew him as "Darus". He had acquired the man's name using the extremely unorthodox method of "asking for it". This bit information proved priceless within the storm of rumor and gossip that swept across Charb. Forlen soon became the most popular boy in town.

The stranger met with the town's lord, a farmer himself who only used the title when official business dictated it. When approached about the meeting afterwards, he gave a simple reply.

"We will help him all we can."

At noon on the day after his arrival, the stranger headed east to Cormland farm.

Darus found little of interest at the farm. It was as the lord had said it would be. The orcs, perhaps half a dozen, took no livestock or possessions. There were no bodies, but the sheer amount of spilled blood left no doubt what the fate of the family had been. The orcs killed the family before they could rise out of bed.

Darus scratched the stubble of his beard, a habit he picked up since growing it out in the wilds. Though he was an agent of the king, Darus had little use for royal custom. He let the beard grow along with his hair which he tied back into a pony tail. Instead of the armor of the knights of the king, he wore a far more practical steel breastplate with pauldrons on his left shoulder and mail at the abdomen.

Darus's mind wandered as his eyes scanned over the details of the farmhouse. For six years he had served the king. His commander discovered his skills as an investigator when he uncovered an assassination plot against the king and he was promoted to an investigator of the wilds.

Darus loved his job although far more difficult than guarding the king's keep. He might go days without food and often found hard eyes on him on the few days he found an inn. But working as the king's agent, working as his hand in the wilds, was Darus's great reward. He knew of the bureaucracy of the king's court but out here it was far simpler. That simplicity and focus was all Darus required.

Wind whipped at Darus's gray cloak. He knelt down to the ground running his hands over a patch of broken wheat. His eyes lifted, looking west. Darus had found the tracks he needed.

Darus took a yellowed map out of his worn leather pack and studied it. His finger drew a line along the forest to the west. Satisfied, he refolded the map, tightened the straps on his pack and ventured into the dark woods.

The sun had set when Darus discovered the orc's camp. Four of the ugly brutes sat at a newly built fire. They growled and grumbled at each other, tearing into the flank of a half-cooked boar. The smell assaulted Darus.

The orcs, as large as they were, did not worry Darus as much as the large mound of dirt behind the orc's camp. The freshly dug mound stood six feet high and fifteen feet in diameter. A black hole four feet across led deep into the mound and under the earth itself. The pit seemed to suck in any light from the rising moon and the large fire.

Next to the cave, the body of a boy, splayed open and bled almost completely white, hung by his feet from a wooden scaffold. His head hung back facing the ground exposing his ripped out throat. The boy's hands were tied behind him. His naked body swung slowly making the rough rope and scaffold creak.

Orcs were nasty creatures, Darus knew, but they did not bleed out and gut their enemies. Darus's mind puzzled on this until a deep growl stood his hair on end. Darus had been discovered.

Darus turned slowly. The huge wolf's red eyes burned into him. Its black coat reflected the red shine of the fire. It bared long sharp teeth. It lowered its great mass to the ground. Darus's hand slipped slowly to the top of his soft boot. His fingers just had time to slide around the hilt of his dagger when the wolf sprang.

Darus threw his arm up into the wolf's maw. Four inch fangs dug deep into his leather bracer but the bracer held. He felt his arm twist in the beast's jaw and he held back a cry of pain. Teeth gritted, Darus stabbed hard with the dagger into the wolf's side. The wolf's eyes widened and then narrowed again as it dug harder. Darus felt the bone of his forearm straining under the beast's strength. The leather bracer stopped the wolf from tearing into Darus's flesh and muscle but the wolf could still break his arm.

Darus pulled the dagger out and stabbed higher in the wolf's body. He twisted and angled the blade through the massive ribcage and hammered it into the wolf's heart. The grip on his arm lessened and the wolf fell dead onto its side.

The chaos of battle wore off of Darus like a cold splash of water. He rolled to his feet and returned to his viewing spot of the orc camp. They had heard. Two of the orcs approached his location with thick bladed swords in their hands. Two others stood at the fire holding large battle axes and watched their companions.

Darus realized he had very little time. He pulled out his longsword. The blade shone brightly and the runes along the center of the blade sparkled in the moonlight. He turned the blade over and stuck it into the earth. Darus drew and strung a large recurved longbow in two quick and practiced motions. His eyes looked towards the approaching orcs as his fingers found the notch for the thick catgut string. They were almost upon him. He reached over his back and drew three arrows. He stabbed two of these into the ground next to his sword and knocked the third into his bow.

Darus drew back the heavy bow past his right ear. His muscles quivered as he waited. The first orc pulled back the brush that hid Darus from the camp's view. Darus let the arrow fly.

The second orc cried out in anger when he saw his companion rolling down the hill with an arrow shaft stuck into one eye and out the back of his head. His cry cut off when another of the oak arrows screamed through his throat cutting his windpipe, veins, and arteries all at once. He fell backwards in a spray of black blood gasping for one last breath that never came.

The two axe wielding orcs rushed up the hill roaring. They held their axes high. Darus pulled the third arrow from the earth and fired it quickly and with little aim. It found its mark, slamming into the closest orc's chest. The orc slowed its charge, chest heaving, and fell panting to the ground.

The final orc was upon him. Darus dropped his bow and drew his shining longsword from the ground. He raised it in time to deflect an overhead chop that would have cut him in half. The orc recovered from the parry quickly and kicked hard into Darus's stomach. Darus caught his footing and slashed hard. The orc shot back and the blade hissed by.

The two opponents stood for a moment looking at one another. The orc bared his teeth in a hellish bloody smile and charged. Darus waited until the last moment and then rolled to the side. The axe cleaved into the earth. Darus, still on his knees, swung hard from the

side. His blade cut deep into the orc's side. The orc turned as Darus stood. Darus cleaved diagonally across the huge orc's chest and the orc fell into a heap.

The moon shone brightly in the night sky. Darus approached the camp. He cut down the mutilated boy and buried it in a quick and shallow grave. He studied the cuts and gashes in the body and he did not like what he found.

Darus looked into the hole that led deep into the earth. It stared back at him like a dead black eye. He would be damned if he was going in there at night. Darus walked back into the woods, leaned up against a tree and dozed.

Darus had traveled the lands for almost a decade and most of these years he traveled alone. He spent hundreds of nights under the open sky with an empty stomach and the hard ground for a bed. Traveling alone meant sleeping alone and few slept alone and survived in the wilds if they didn't unconsciously know when to wake up. Four years previous he woke up just before a band of highway men stumbled into his camp. He had been well rewarded for that job, a job that seemed to find him. A year before that he had awakened when a brown bear smelled his cooked meal. He let the bear take what it wanted. This night he woke when a painfully beautiful young woman stepped into his camp.

Her hair was as black as the night behind her and her skin was soft and fair. She wore a thin gown that whispered around her in the cool breeze. Her deep black eyes made Darus's heart cry. She stepped lightly to him, a look of fright and shyness on her face. Darus did not move. She knelt down and crawled to him on her hands and knees. Her eyes never left his. Darus felt love and longing for this beautiful girl. He wanted to reach out and touch her. He wanted to kiss her red lips. He wanted her more than he wanted anything in his whole life. He would do anything to have her. She moved close to him, her arms and legs outside of his. He felt her breath on his face, warm and sweet. Her lips parted and she tilted her head coming close in to kiss him. His own lips parted. She moved closer.

Darus buried his dagger into her chest.

The girl screamed with a sharp and violent voice that tore deep into Darus's head. It was a voice beyond her own body. Darus's ears rang. Her face transformed from one of beauty into one of rage. Her eyes blazed in fury. Her mouth opened wide revealing a set of long sharp fangs. Darus twisted the blade.

A year or so previous, Darus happened upon a den of lycanthropic wererats. He found that his normal dagger did little good against the smelly fellows and he used some of the king's allowance to commission the forging of a dagger of silver. He killed the wererats with the fine silver blade and now the blade saved his life. The golden hilt and shining blade was all that stood between Darus and those

horrible fangs. Darus twisted the blade again.

The maiden flew back and slid to her feet in a movement faster than human. Black blood poured down the front of her thin nightshirt. Darus stood and drew his longsword. Like the dagger, its runed blade cut deep into the unnatural beasts who shrugged off the attacks of normal weapons. The maiden hissed again, a stream of blood pouring out of her mouth and down between her breasts. Darus swung hard and felt the blade cleave halfway through her neck before she burst into smoke and vanished.

A pair of deep red eyes, high and wide, stared at him from the darkness of the forest.

"You should have let her take you," spoke a deep unnatural voice. Darus found his heart sink. It was the voice of a victor, the voice of death. Darus felt his hands shake. He wanted to let his blade fall to the ground. He wanted to close his eyes and let come what may. He wanted this to be over.

The huge orc stepped into the clearing. Its gray skin stretched over sharp bones. Thick corded muscle, scarred in hideous symbols, covered the beast from head to toe. A pile of blood-red hair spilled into a ragged topknot. The moonlight shined off of the beast's red-steel breastplate. The orc opened its mouth and bared its own set of hideous pointed teeth. Darus felt a deep rumble in his chest and bones.

Darus pulled a memory from deep in mind of his fencing instructor, a scarred and thin man who routinely bested men twice his size.

"When the mind is unable to make the right decisions, let the hand make them for you."

Darus gripped the leather wrapped handle of his runed blade. He closed his eyes and breathed deep. When he opened them his mind was clear. This was no more than an enemy in front of him. He would swing and he would cut it. It was that simple. With a charge faster than Darus could see, the orc was upon him.

Darus almost died in the first attack. The orc's teeth stretched inches away from Darus's throat. The orc's claws tore into his back with great strength. The smell of death filled Darus's lungs and made him gag. Only his silver dagger saved him as it had with the girl. He grappled with the huge orc, using his forearm to keep the massive beast from sinking in those terrible fangs. Darus lashed out with the shining

dagger hoping to stab it into the orc's stomach but he hit only air. The orc was gone.

Darus planted one hand on the ground and swung his right leg under him, standing as his fencing instructor, also an accomplished wrestler, had taught him. He gripped his runed sword tight. The orc stood across from him calmly drawing a massive greatsword from behind his back. The orc smiled.

Darus stepped back with his right foot and held his blade to his ear, its tip pointing at the unnatural beast. The orc smiled again, the tip of his greatsword scraping a lazy half-circle in the dirt. They stood watching each other for what seemed like days. Their eyes never left one another. Then, in a flash, the vampire orc attacked.

The orc raised his huge sword high over his head but turned and swung the blade low just before striking. The sword cut in from the side. Darus hopped back. Four inches more and Darus would have lost both of his legs at the thigh. With amazing speed the orc turned the sword and stabbed at Darus. Darus parried the attack and cut across. The cut was short and the orc knew it, not moving as the blade raced past his throat.

The two figures paused again. The orc casually rested his blade on his shoulder and paced around to the left. Darus panted for breath, his sword held defensively in front of him. Never in his thirty five years had he faced such a foe. In a head on match, this orc fiend would kill him. Darus's mind raced to find an advantage. He found his answer in a flashback to a meeting he had with a priest of Dalyr and a gift the priest had given him. Darus twirled his beautiful blade in his right hand and yelled "ha ha!" as a distraction while his left hand went to a pouch at his belt. Thinking the stupid man realized his demise, the grey-skinned orc attacked. He roared and swung hard from the right. Darus's hand snapped out and moonlight flashed from the glass bottle he threw. With perfect speed and accuracy, the orc cut off his attack and smashed the glass bottle mid-flight. The bottle exploded into a cloud of blue water that covered the orc's face and chest.

Black smoke filled the air and the sizzle of the holy liquid eating through the orc's face was drowned out by the orc's unholy cry. Darus took the advantage and stabbed his longsword into the orc's abdomen. The orc slammed Darus away but the king's man rushed back in, cutting a deep gash from the orc's right shoulder to its left hip. Black blood sprayed in a fan as the beast's chest opened up in a long deep wound. Darus glimpsed white bone and rotten organs before the orc

burst into a cloud of smoke.

Darus stood alone. His eyes shifted to the gaping maw of the hole that stood black against the dark mound. He looked up to the moon, sighed a breath of fresh air, and entered the pit.

Two days after he left Charb, the king's man returned. The eyes of curious villagers, their tongues wagging in gossip and rumor, followed him as he walked to the town's main hall. Like before, the meeting was short and few ever learned what was said. The problem was solved, the mayor spoke, but it wasn't until weeks of peace proved him right that the villagers believed him.

The stranger spent one more night at Jorn's tavern. He spoke little but ate much. He didn't know when his next good meal would be. Darus told the mayor little of what he had seen and said nothing of what he found in the pit. It would be weeks before the visions of the beautiful maiden curled naked around the recovering body of the orc vampire would leave him. It would be even longer before he forgot what they looked like when he drove spikes of wood through their chests and cut off their heads. The young girl had opened her eyes in a look of fright and innocence before his blade split the creamy skin of her neck. The townsfolk had no need to share in such horrors. Darus alone would carry them. The following morning, his cloak pulled tight around him, the king's man left Charb.

Author's Notes: This is my second oldest non-Everquest bit of fiction and the first story I hand wrote. The original title "what you talkin' 'bout, Vampire Orc" didn't really work so I changed it to the King's Man. I thought an orcish vampire might be a neat bad guy in a story and I think it works out ok. I don't think I'll be putting orcs in any other stories, though, now that Faigon floats in the universe with its demons, vampires, telepaths, slave lords, murderous mercenaries, and the ancient lost secrets of the Old Empire.

Vrenna and the Slave Pits

Vrenna didn't scream. She didn't scream when the whip left rivers of blood on the pale skin of her back. She didn't scream when they pressed a bright orange iron against her right shoulderblade. They punched her and kicked her and raped her and she made no sound at all. She looked at the slavemasters, themselves slaves but of a higher stature, one eye swollen shut but the other blazing with blue white fire. With their arms tired and their lust for violence lost on the silence of the woman, they left her bloody and naked in her cell. She lay there in the carved rock and mud cell, one of twenty thousand such cells in the slave pits of Gazu Kadem.

For five hundred years the slave nation of Gazu Kadem dug deep into the earth. They dug with atrophied muscles and bleeding fingers

under the whip of the Gazu Kadem slave lords. Two thousand feet across and one thousand feet deep, the pit of Ashar was the entire dark world to its sixty thousand captives.

The cone shaped pit served many purposes. Hundreds of tunnels spidered deep into the rock underbed of Gazu Kadem. Some found deposits of iron, some found gold. A few even found the forgotten chambers, vaults, and tombs of the old empire, now two thousand years dead.

Humanity was a lost concept in the slave pits. Most were born, worked, and died without ever looking over the lip at the golden city whose riches they financed. One in ten children survived their first five years. Females and some males who showed the proper quality were sold as whores to Dan Avadana, the mistress of the pleasure palaces. There they bowed to the perverted whims of the rich nobles of the city who grew fat and soft on the bloody backs of Gazu Kadem's slave workers. Of those born in the slave pits, the pleasure slaves had the best possible life.

Males of exceptional fortitude and bloodlust were sold to Dan Trex of the city's slave army. Forged in blood and cruelty, Trex's army was feared throughout the souther deserts and even by the noble lords of the city itself. Trex's army was the only threat Danken Ovalde, overking of Gazu Kadem, knew.

For most born in Gazu Kadem, life was in the pits. These people knew no love for none loved them. They knew no mercy for none were ever merciful. They knew murder and rape and disease for these were all around them. They knew the whip. They knew the only way out of the pit was on the bodies of ten others like themselves. For those ten, there was the cesspool at the bottom of the pits, festering with decay, disease, human waste, and the bodies of the dead. Life in the pits was life in hell.

Cold water crashed on Vrenna like shards of steel. She opened her one good eye and saw three men. Two were slave whipmasters, slaves themselves who had learned that cruelty was rewarded. The third, dressed in a brown leather tunic, tall boots, and a fine black leather cloak, must have been a free citizen. He was the first Vrenna had seen since being taken into the pits. His skin was not chapped and his fingers were not torn. A band of silver clasped back his thick hair and a black hilted sword hung from his wide leather belt.

"One of my men came to me when he saw the marks on your neck. He

said he had seen one of you down in Gazu Kuul. He was a superstitious man. No matter how much I threatened or beat him, he would not come back here.

"He was a superstitious man but I am not. I have heard the stories, to be sure. Fair skin, eyes like the sky, three black diamonds on the right side of the neck. I may have work for you worthy of your talent."

Vrenna kept her one good eye on the man. His smile did not leave his face.

"There is a guard captain of Trex who causes us much grief. Lucky for us he has found a young lad in the village of waste who strikes his fancy and none see swords fall in that place. We would like to remain distant from this situation, however. Kill him and you can walk out of Gazu Kadem this very night. Refuse and we will throw you into the old pits."

Vrenna let the silence hang in the cell. The unstable rock of the slave pits groaned around them. The cries and screams of the tormented filled the air. Vrenna smiled and held her shackled hands towards the man. He smiled back and beckoned one of the two whipmasters, a large scarred brute who had whispered unknown words into Vrenna's ear when he forced himself inside her a night before, to unlock her chains. Her chains fell from her wrists and then her ankles. She stretched upright and twisted her waist, ignoring the eyes that crawled over her lithe naked body. She met the gaze of the black-cloaked noble and smiled.

She kicked the brute who unlocked her hard in the groin with enough force to lift him off of the ground. Something broke inside him. He stumbled backwards, vomited, and fell gasping to the ground. A few minutes later he would be dead.

Vrenna smashed her palm into the cloaked man's face as he drew his black-hilted sword. She finished the draw for him, snapping his wrist in a series of loud pops and forcing his own hand into cutting open his own belly before taking the blade from his grasp. He screamed as his intestines fell into a heap at his feet.

The noble's blade was very strong and its edge was very sharp. Vrenna turned and cut low with the black-hilted sword, slicing the back of the last guard's knee as he tried to flee. He crashed down screaming with his leg twisted at an impossible angle. Vrenna pressed a knee into his back and split open his skull.

Vrenna stepped over to the cloaked man, still grasping at his spilt organs with his good hand, the other twisted halfway around in the wrong direction. Vrenna cut the clasp of the black leather cloak around his neck and deep at the soft flesh underneath. She whipped the cloak back just as blood sprayed from the man's throat. Vrenna wrapped the cloak around her naked body and left her cell with the three ruined men still within.

Foul wind rushed in on Vrenna as she stepped out onto the serpentine walkway that twisted its wan down deeper into the pit of Ashar. The two thousand foot pit gaped out in front of her. Clouds of smoke and dust painted the sky in red. The single shining disc of the hot sun shone above her in the blood red sky. All around her, Vrenna heard the deep rumbling of the constantly unsteady earth, the sharp echoes of steel on stone, and the moans and grunts of the slaves. The smell of sulphur, waste, disease, and sweat converged into a thick pungent aroma that had Vrenna gasping for one clean breath.

Vrenna turned and met the gaping expression of a thin brown man who had been pushing a wheel barrel full of broken rock before Vrenna had stood in front of him. He continued his open mouth stare for the better half of a minute before a roar of anger and the crack of a whip had him instinctively ducking. A deep voice powered by torn lungs filled with fluid roared out from a larger dark-skinned man stepping up behind the cart pusher.

"If you stop again I will push you into the dead lake and see if you can swim with the corpses of your children."

The whip cracker's threat stopped when he saw Vrenna standing in her newly acquired leather cloak and a black-hilted sword in her hand. His hand raised the whip but it never came down. Vrenna dashed forward and cut first. Blood gushed out from the whip cracker's arm and he screamed loud. More heads turned and Vrenna caught the site of movement. More guards ran from both sides of the narrow path. She looked down at the spiral path below her that stretched around the inside wall of the slave pit. Vrenna dropped to the lower walkway twelve feet below her. A quick glance told her that guards on this level also rushed to meet her. She dropped two more levels, her heels slipping on the rock path nearly throwing her over the edge and crashing level by level to the poisoned cesspool at the pit's bottom.

Vrenna ran down the walkway, peering into the caves that dug deep into the outer wall. Many of those led to narrow cramped rooms

where dozens of slaves would live their nights, but some dug deeper. At the first sign of a deeper cave, Vrenna rushed inside.

Vrenna raced through a network of hand-carved caves reinforced with beams of creaking wood. The air thickened and grew stale. The shouts and sounds of wooden-heeled shoes rushing from behind her let Vrenna gage her lead. They were close.

Vrenna continued down the corridors leading lower and deeper into the rock. Soon she came to the end of the carved rock where the floor had broken through creating a hole of jagged rock. Vrenna peered through the drop. An ancient hallway lay below looking much more finely carved than the caves above. The squared walls and an arched ceiling of the hallway led deeper into the earth. Cold air blew past her from the gaping jagged maw of the ancient chamber below.

The sound of running feet gave Vrenna the motivation she needed. Without any idea what horrors may lurk in the ancient chasm below, Vrenna dropped down the jagged rock hole and into the chambers of the old empire. Her pursuers did not follow.

Blackness expanded around Vrenna. Above her, far out of reach, dim light shined from the hole above revealing the halls around her. Cold wind blew past her in gusts and the sound of dripping water echoed far away.

Vrenna waited for any pursuer to drop down the pit and meet the edge of her new blade. She took a minute to examine the sword. The blade was very sharp, single edged and wider at one end. It swept back in a curve leading to the black ribbed hilt. The black metal hilt was shaped like a scorpion. The two ends of the hand guard twisted up and ended in carved pincers while the hilt widened and tapered ending in a sharp stinger twisted up towards the blade's edge. Black leather wrapped the grip. Vrenna liked the blade very much.

Vrenna removed her leather cloak and stood naked in the shadows of the ancient cavern. She cut a wide strip of leather from the thick cloak and cut the ends into three thin cords. She tied the leather band across her breasts and tied it with three knots in the back. She cut another wider strip of leather and wrapped it around her waist in a short sarong. She turned a third patch of leather into a sheath for her new sword and hung it from a thin leather tie around her slender waist. She gave one last look to the crack in the ceiling and then walked deeper into the ancient vault of the old empire.

Darkness engulfed her. She moved slowly, her fingers and toes feeling the cracks of the floor. She kept her eyes wide, her pupils nearly fully dilated and straining for any sign of light. None came. The thick dust of centuries collected between her toes. She sought any drop or break in the floor's surface. Even a twisted ankle in this place would mean death. With no light and no idea where she was going, death might find her soon regardless.

Old smells filled her nostrils. Dust and mold hung thick in the air. Soon, as she carefully shuffled in the dark, the stench of decay arose. Not the ancient decay of this lost hall, but the more recent decay of spoiled meat. Vrenna found the cause of this smell when her foot sunk into soft loose flesh.

Vrenna knelt down and felt the area. She hoped to find what sort of beast it was and had her answer when her fingers felt the coarse fabric of a slave tunic. There were three slaves and they were in pieces. Her fingers would slide down their shoulders to find ragged stumps instead of arms. She would feel torsos ripped open. The smell choked her. They had been down here for weeks. Fortune smiled upon Vrenna when she found a leather bag and the flint and steel it held inside. She grinned in the dark as her fingers began chipping the steel bar across the flat flint stone.

Her makeshift torch burned bright and for the first time Vrenna saw the carnage in front of her. The three men she had found turned out to be eight. Something had ripped and thrashed them to pieces. They had wooden spears and knobbed clubs, but they did not appear used. Black splashes of old blood caked the floor and walls. Some of the men had been crushed eight or nine feet up on the wall. These examinations brought her attention to the walls themselves. Huge rectangular stones formed the walls and arched to the ceiling. Each rock had been etched with tiny characters of a strange language unknown to Vrenna. She traced her finger along the script line by line feeling the perfect carving of each character. Something about the text sent goose bumps along her white skin. This text wasn't known by anyone now, it was a language lost for thousands of years. It was a language that should remain lost.

When she stood back she widened the scope of her vision along the hall. Billions of the angular and twisting characters stretched along the hallway from top to bottom. Each rock might have taken months to carve. This single hall must have taken decades to build. Gods knew how many such halls lay buried and lost under the city of Gazu Kadem.

Something large and heavy thudded behind her in the shadows. Vrenna snapped awake and drew the scorpion blade from her makeshift belt in a flash of white steel. Another deep thud sent vibrations through the floor. A gust of air like a thick hot breath blew past her. Something had seen her torch. Something had seen the torches of these eight dismembered slaves and it had killed them for it. A third thud sent Vrenna running down the opposite direction of the large hallway.

Vrenna spent little time picking between a split in the tunnels ahead. She could only pray she didn't meet a dead end. She soon realized, however, that whatever ancient horror chased her through these tunnels, it was getting closer. Running would not work forever.

Vrenna came to another split in the halls. She tossed the torch far down one hall and fled down the other into the engulfing darkness. She should have continued to flee but some morbid curiosity got the better of her. She turned and watched the illuminated hallway behind her as the creature approached.

It was huge. It carried its bulk on two giant forelimbs each with rows of gleaming claws. It had no hind legs, instead dragging its bulk across the ground behind it. Huge bulbous projections lined its scaled body. Its jaw was long and filled with razor sharp teeth. Two great globes of deep black eyes rolled in thick stalks from its huge skull. The fungus and mold of a millenium grew within the cracks of the beast's huge armored shell.

Most disturbing, however, was not the sight Vrenna saw but the thoughts and images in her head. She could feel the creature's hunger. She heard it wailing softly and sweetly like a hungry child. The sounds in her head made her heart ache and tried to drive her forward to help. Had she not seen the hellish monster ahead, she would have gladly come to the aid of that calling. Vrenna had once heard of a lizard of the deep desert that kept a small insect-like appendage above the sands so birds would come down for a free meal. The lizard would snatch the bird out of the air as soon as the bird got close. This abyssal monster did the same thing only with the telepathic call of the outer worlds. The slaves behind her never stood a chance.

The call continued and Vrenna closed her eyes tight. The torchlight vanished, crushed under the massive clawed foot of the huge beast. It roared out, both vocally and telepathically, its cry crushing down on Vrenna's psyche like tons of stone. She heard its great bulk shift in the hallway ahead of her. Then the deep thuds of its feet echoed through

the halls again. It was coming towards her.

Vrenna stood her ground. The cry of the hungry wailing child filled her head but the woman kept focused. She concentrated on the weight of the scorpion-hilted sword in her hand, the feel of the leather wrap in her palm, and the texture of the stone under her feet. She bent her knees took a deep breath of the stale air. She could feel those two giant black eyes swallowing her into the black hell that had vomited forth the huge beast. Vrenna had only one chance. She felt a gust of air rush past her as the beast inhaled.

Vrenna leapt to her right, tucking her legs under her as she felt the enormous jaws of the beast slam shut. She cut down hard and felt the blade cut through soft flesh and hard bone. Something fell to the ground in a wet thud.

The beast roared, echoing through the ancient tunnels and deep in Vrenna's mind. She prepared for another strike but none came. With a heave of its great girth, the abyssal behemoth turned and crashed through the halls in retreat.

Vrenna waited a moment before retrieving and relighting her torch. She returned to the spot where she had fought off the huge beast. At her feet lay a long horseshoe shaped object. Razor sharp crystalline teeth ringed its outer edge. One side was cut smooth, drenched in a pool of black blood. It was half of the creature's upper jaw. Even this dead piece of the creature filled Vrenna with a sickening wrench in her stomach. Such a fiend was never meant to walk in this world and the gods knew how long it had wandered these halls.

The sewer and aqueduct system of Gazu Kadem dated back to the old empire. Like the dark beasts lurking in its depths, the sewer system had mutated for a thousand years. No one lived who could tell how the sewer system worked. Like most things built during the first empire, the sewers were built to last; built to run on their own for as long as the walls stood standing.

Two days after her escape, Vrenna pushed back an iron grating and climbed out and into the sunlight. She had emerged into the Wastes; the district of Gazu Kadem owned entirely by the starving, the plague-ridden, and the dregs of the city. Word would spread fast of the pale skinned woman emerging from the depths of below so Vrenna had to move quickly. She sold one of the large crystalline teeth for less than it was worth but far more than she needed. Five more of the teeth sat in the leather pouch at her waist, the leather pouch once owned by a

slave who had been ripped to pieces by the beast below. She bought provisions and a good horse with half of the strange copper coins this city called currency. She left the city at dusk through one of the tiny broken down gates that separated the Wastes from the desert of the west.

An hour later, Vrenna sat on the back of her black horse and looked over the city of Gazu Kadem. She saw the two huge slave pits to the south east with a third beginning construction. To the north, along the shores of Fel Kadem, the lake of Emeralds, sat the huge temple of Danken Ovalde, the secluded ruler of the inner city.

The seven hundred foot high ziggurat was a powerful monument to the old empire, a temple of worship to dark and ancient gods now long forgotten. Vrenna now saw this huge temple for what it was; the tip of a huge stone iceberg floating in a sea of sand. It was but the tip of a much older and larger city now buried under a billion tons of sand and rock. As they dug their pits, the slave lords would uncover this city stone by stone. They might not be prepared for the horrors that lay within, horrors that guarded unlimited treasures. Vrenna would return one day and seek these riches, but not today.

Vrenna turned her horse south and galloped hard across the desert.

Author's Notes: This story was rejected for being too brutal in the first paragraph alone. The rejecting editor felt that no reader would want to relate to a woman being beaten and raped. He's probably right but when I came up with the scenerio of Vrenna captured and escaping from the Slave Pits of Gazu Kadem, I could think of no realistic alternative. I also wanted Vrenna to be a bit more human, a bit more scarred, than a typical high fantasy character. Her life is not an easy one. Gazu Kadem was meticulously detailed before I wrote this story and the city and its slave lords come up often in other tales. Vrenna will one day return to Gazu Kadem.

The Warlord's Legacy

Huge doors crashed open, spilling a river of sunlight across the stone floor. The Warlord of Halavar strode into his hall with blood on his hands and death in his eyes. He carried his massive battle axe, Mountaincleaver, in one huge hand and his half-rhino skull helm in the other. He was a terror to behold, even to his closest servants and advisers. To his enemies he was nothing, not anymore. He had killed them all.

The Warlord stripped his bloody cloak and threw it to the floor. A nervous attendant skittered behind collecting the fur cloak up in his thin arms. The Warlord tore away the leather straps at his side and his massive steel breastplate crashed to the stone floor. Firelight glistened off of his thick muscled chest and his concubines blushed and peeked from behind curtains of silk and satin. The Warlord cared not of his nakedness or of the giggles of his women. He fell into his large throne and rested his axe on the throne's wide arm. His head fell into the stained palm of his hand and trouble lined his brow. Silence filled the hall until the Warlords low voice broke it.

"What will I become when death finds me?" The dark voice and its dark words echoed low across the large hall. "Who will remember what I have done?"

"Bards will sing songs of your victory. Your children will pay homage to you each morning." The attendant, having dragged the warlord's fallen cloak and armor away, returned to the Warlord's side. He spoke softly with his head down, aware, as he had been most of his life, that a single misspoken word would end his life.

"Tell me of my father's death." The warlord, his head still resting on his hand, glared at his attendant through his fingers.

"He fought back the orc hoards that threatened Halavar and hewed down three ice-giant lords before a rogue spear stole him from us." The attendant looked to the sky as he had been taught to by his predecessor, a noble man who lost his life when he snickered at the Warlord's bed-hair one morning.

"He was drunk! He failed to lie with any of his slave girls and so he went for a drunken ride on his war-mammoth. He fell and his own mount trampled him to death!" The Warlord rose out of his throne with his hands balled into fists. Red spots filled his shaven cheeks and his blood-caked blond hair fell in front of his eyes. The fury of the Warlord was clear to all in the large hall and they all feared for their lives. "No one remembers but me and when I die, no one will remember either of us. Stories will become distorted and lose nearly all truth. Nothing that happened will matter. I will die. I will rot. It will be as though I have never been." The warlord fell back into his huge throne and fell silent.

"I may have an answer, m'lord." A tall figure stepped from the shadows. The Warlord narrowed his eyes, taking in the stranger's appearance. The stranger wore white robes of silk and covered his tall

head with a hood. Three small red circles marked his ebony skin below his left eye. The Warlord, very conscious of where his axe sat on his throne, let the man speak. Should the stranger displease him, the Warlord would cleave him in two and wash the floor in his blood.

"My name is Oric and I travel from across the seas to the west." Oric opened a leather-skinned satchel. "I have two gifts for you. One of these grants you immortality." Oric drew two rectangular bundles of parchment leaves bound and wrapped in wood covered with leather. One had a beautiful golden dragon embossed on the cover. The other was blank.

"What are they?" The Warlord's voice sounded tired and impatient. The Warlord's attendant, aware of the typical conclusion of that voice, stepped back and turned the blood-stained cloak he carried to protect him from the shower of blood that would soon rain across the hall. The western traveler appeared not to notice the disdain in the Warlord's voice or did not appear to care.

"They are called 'books', m'lord. They record lives long past. They tell tales of adventure hundreds of years old." Oric opened the dragon-marked book and displayed two pages covered with strange black symbols.

"Is it a spell? I have no use for magic." The Warlord moved his hand from his brow to the handle of his axe.

"In a way. It releases a magic within our own minds." Oric turned the book towards himself. "This one tells the story of a boy. His family cast him out in the wilderness to die. A rabid bear comes across the starving child but the boy, angry and hungry, stabs the bear through the eye with a stick sharpened on a rock. Years later, wearing the bear's skull as a helm, the boy, now a powerful hunter, returns to his tribe and seeks his revenge.

"This book tells all of the hunter's stories. The revenge he took, the battles he fought, the lands he conquered; they are all here." Oric held up the book in the palm of his hand like an ancient religious relic. "This book," he opened and held up the other book, "is for you."

The Warlord stared hard at Oric for a long time. When he spoke, his voice startled everyone in the room.

"Tell me more of this boy."

The Warlord ordered his servant to pull a chair up for the strange

traveler from the west and throughout the night the man, Oric, told the Warlord of the boy who grew to rule. Throughout the night and into the following day, the Warlord sat and listened to the tale, leaning forward and eyes unblinking. One of the bolder of the slave girls came to the Warlord late into the night and kissed his hand with soft lips. He dismissed her violently. She skittered back behind the silk curtains of the harem with tears leaving rivers of white skin through her painted cheeks. No one disturbed them the rest of the night.

Sunlight streamed into the hall from the high open windows of the hall. The massive fire, roaring high when the Warlord returned from battle now glowed in embers of orange and gray. At noon, Oric spoke the last words of the tale. He closed the book with a thud that echoed throughout the hall and made even the Warlord blink in surprise. Another dangerous silence filled the hall.

"I lived another's life this night. I saw what he saw. I felt what he felt." The Warlord sat back hard in his throne, his eyes wide.

"And others can live yours," spoke Oric.

A jolt of fear and anger flooded through the Warlord. Others could live his life? But it was his! No one could take it from him. No one should! His hand moved back to the handle of his axe where it sat through the night. Then he remembered the tale of the boy; the boy cast out from his own village who returned home a powerful warrior and ruler. The Warlord remembered cleaving down two ice giants in the previous day's battle. He remembered the feel of his axe as it crushed the tendons behind their knees. He remembered the rush of victory when he hewed down the Snow Orc General and sealed dominance for his kingdom. This man in front of him could capture that life. His life could be lived for centuries.

He would tell this man his story and the man, Oric, would scribe it into that book. When he was finished, the Warlord would cast aside his kingdom and leave it to his two sons to fight over. He would travel west with Oric where he would spend the rest of his days living hundreds of other lives in the libraries of Odus. He would die a far richer man than he ever dreamed.

The Warlord looked at Oric with a powerful gaze.

"Write my tale. Capture what I have done so others will see what I have seen. Begin the tale from the moment you and I met, for it was that day that I found my greatest treasure and that day that I began

my Legacy."

Oric smiled, drew out a thin hollow reed and a bottle of thick black ink. He dipped the reed into the ink and began carefully scribing symbols onto the ivory page of the empty book. It began:

"Huge doors crashed open, spilling a river of sunlight across the stone floor. The Warlord of Halavar strode into his hall with blood on his hands and death in his eyes."

Author's Notes: I wrote this story and submitted it to Sony Online for the EQ Newsletter. A year later it was finally published there. I love this story for its size and simplicity and the way it turns back on itself at the end. It's one of my favorites.

Vrenna the Pit Fighter

The large red sun burned hot in the orange sky. Sand ripped across the fortress city of Tog Veel, the Fortress of Swords. Mountain peaks blocked the destructive sands of the southern desert but what crawled over the jagged black rock tore in on the city like a claw.

Ataven was tired. It had been a long day and the pit master was ready to go home. Iben, Ataven's account handler and odds negotiator walked on his left. Gom, Ataven's pit fighter, walked on his right.

Gom stood proud, the sweat glistening on his dark shaved head. He still wore the leather handwraps he had used during his practice fights an hour earlier. It didn't matter to the huge fighter that today's match was set up to increase the odds in his favor so he could take more money when he lost in the ten-day fights three days later.

Like most of the pit fighters, he was oblivious to the logical concepts that drove the fights. Gom was sure to win today's fight and sure to lose the fight against the Kal in three days.

Today Gom had knocked out two of his opponent's teeth and sent him unconscious to the sands. For the win he would get two hours in a pleasure house. That was all the huge fighter cared about. Ataven admired Gom's single-minded simplicity. All he wanted was victory and sex. Tonight he would get an hour with a pleasure slave. If he won in three days it would be three hours with three slaves. Ataven saw Gom grinning in anticipation. That suited Ataven just fine, Gom was Ataven's best fighter. Gom was his only fighter.

A huge man armored in the black armor of a Gazu Kadem warrior

rode by on an equally armored black stallion. He held three chains in his hand connected to the collars of three very voluptuous and very naked women. From the glint in their eyes, Ataven was pretty sure the armored man would find himself robbed and naked in the desert. The three women would sell his armor, horse, and anything else for far more than he paid for the three of them. Such was life in Tog Veel.

Ataven looked over to Iben. The small stout man wiped his brow under his wide-brimmed hat that shadowed his pale skin from the northern sun. The man had lived in Tog Veel for five years but had not yet gotten used to the heat. Ataven saw lines of worry under the glistens of sweat on his brow.

Why shouldn't he worry? They were dealing with Sarden after all. Few ever dealt with Sarden and didn't suffer for it. Sarden ruled the fighting pits. Nothing happened in those pits that Sarden didn't anticipate or control. Now he controlled Ataven, Gom, and Iben, but the money was right. On the ten-day fight, Gom would fall and the three of them would be free of Sarden. In a year Gom could come back and perhaps be champion. Either way, they would all be richer for it.

Ataven didn't see the woman coming until he felt Gom stiffen. She was cloaked in gray and wore little else. Small black leather garments covered her breasts and rode high up her legs standing in stark contrast to her ivory skin. Black leather gloves covered her hands and tall leather boots covered her legs up to mid-thigh. She wore her hood up but her eyes shone sky blue beneath it. She was beautiful but something in that look set Ataven off balance. Whatever it was didn't seem to bother Gom.

As the woman passed, Gom gave her a slap on her rump. Gom roared with laughter and continued walking. His laughter stopped dead when he felt the woman's own mighty slap on his buttock. He whirled and saw the woman wink as she walked away. Ataven burst out laughing. He had never seen such a look of shock and embarrassment on the huge fighter. Gom's cheeks had grown bright red. He turned around and roared over the crowded streets.

"If you want to play, whore, come back and I will show you how I play."

The woman stopped. Ataven was still laughing until she turned around. Her eyes flashed but her face broke out in a smile. She glided back to him pushing her chest out and swinging her hips as she

approached. Gom seemed at a loss for words. She got very close to the pit fighter. She took one of his hands and placed it on her ivory thigh.

Later, Ataven would remember hearing the whisper of steel on leather, but at the time he didn't see or hear a thing. He would only remember her pale blue eyes and the smile on her red lips. Gom later told them that he felt her warm thigh under his hand and then his hand grew cold but like the others, his eyes never left hers. It wasn't until she turned and was twenty feet away when Gom held up his hand and looked at it.

There was a thin red line across the palm. When he opened it, he saw the line open down through the muscle and tendons in his hand all the way to the white bone of his fingers. He fainted into a heap as blood rushed down his wrist in a wide river.

It took Ataven and Iben two hours to get the huge man to a healer but it didn't matter. Gom couldn't fight with his fingers hanging like limp useless sausages. Once Sarden found out the fight was off, they would all need healers.

Two thousand years previously, Tog Veel served as the north-western barracks of the Emperor's army. The Fortress of Swords was nearly two hundred miles from the nearest cities of Gazu Vuul and Gazu Kadem. It was a small city, nestled in the valley of two mountains that blocked the harshest winds of the southern deserts. Four towers atop these mountains, once the watchtowers of Tog Veel, now housed the four lords of the city.

Each lord controlled one of the four primary trades of Tog Veel. Dan Verelza traded in the soft flesh of the beautiful. Her pleasure palace was second only to the palaces of Gazu Kadem in quality or price. Dan Tott controlled the growth and harvesting of the Red Lotus, a flower whose fragrance sent the lowliest slave to the heavens above. Dan Tott bragged that twenty six in thirty of the citizens and slaves of Tog Veel required his blood red flowers every day.

Dan Lest acted as the northern hand of the slave pits of Gazu Kadem. Twenty thousand slaves, mostly addicted to the scents of Dan Tott's Red Lotus, filled Dan Lest's coffers with bleeding fingers and broken backs. Dan Surel, the bandit lord, traded in goods. Rumors whispered that Dan Surel ruled over a small army of desert bandits. Many of the more expensive items sold to travelers found their way back into Dan Surel's possession days after the traveler left the small city.

Dan Sarden, the "Little Lord", didn't officially hold the title of Tog Veel's other lords. He did not live in the four towers poised on the mountain peaks above the dirt, blood, and sweat that stabilized the positions of the four lords of Tog Veel. Sarden was also known as the "Tar Dan", the Pit Lord, to those who wished to flatter him. He ran the fights that happened every ten days in the sunken arena just north and east of Tog Veel's northern gates. Sarden ran the games, set up the fighters, and grew rich from the profits. Yet he still lived in the city itself, in an ancient rock building that once housed the northern general of the old empire.

It was here Ataven traveled to meet Sarden.

Disjointed rocks lined the narrow street. Misplaced slaves and the dregs of the city sat with their eyes glazed over, a thin line of drool on their chins, and a crushed red flower in their palm. The smell of rot, waste, and decay hung unmoving in the hot air. Plump rats nibbled and scurried in the two thousand year old gutters of the ancient street.

Ataven approached the columned front of Sarden's palace. He felt his stomach knot and feared it might let go one way or the other. A thick muscled guard, Rev was his name, saw Ataven and smiled revealing a row of jagged, broken, and missing teeth. Ataven remembered Rev when he was a pit fighter himself but a broken leg and a mashed jaw put him in the position of one of Sarden's bodyguards. He had not lost his taste for cruelty.

"He's not expecting you for three days."

"I must speak to the Tar Dan."

The dark muscled man kept his arms crossed across his tattooed chest and kept his ugly grin on his face before finally reaching back and opening the door. Ataven stepped inside. Rev followed and motioned for two other guards to take the door. Ataven realized Rev was waiting for him. Sarden's eyes saw far, it appeared. Ataven wondered how fast the news of his approach reached Sarden's palace.

Ataven felt tiny next to Rev's large size as the man led him past dozens of statues of fighting men and naked women. Thick tapestries sewn with golden thread covered the walls. Bare chested women carried plates of food past Ataven.

Ataven smelled blood on the air as soon as he entered the large room where Rev had led him. A stone pit sunk seven feet in the center of the floor. A white wolf sat content on one side of the pit, its mouth caked in bright red. On the other, two brown dogs lay torn to pieces. Ataven saw Sarden talking to another man and gesturing at the pit as he approached.

"Rev, I don't need any more mangy mutts today. Ice had her fill."

"He says it's important."

Sarden put one of his green eyes on Ataven. Sarden earned the title "little lord" in more ways than one, he stood nearly a head shorter than Ataven, but that piercing stare made Ataven feel as small as the rats outside. Sarden's white hair, thin and balding at the top, was

pulled back into a gold jeweled band. A deep scar across his face kept his mouth in a permanent scowl that showed small sharp teeth when he spoke.

"Well?"

Sarden's manner didn't change as Ataven told him of Gom and the woman. When Ataven finished, Sarden kept the unblinking stare on Ataven until Ataven looked down at his feet.

"She cut his hand open?"

"To the bone."

"That is a hell of a thing." Sarden hissed through his lower teeth.

"I won't cancel the fight," Ataven said, hoping to get ahead of Sarden's stream of thought. He failed.

"Of course you won't cancel the fight. I don't care if you or that fat pig you sleep with has to get clobbered by the Kal, someone's going to fight. There is only one hellish grinning son-of-a-whore who can stop this fight." Sarden kept his murderous stare on Ataven and spoke the last word from within a clenched jaw of sharp teeth. "Me."

"The girl will fight."

This statement finally seemed to catch Sarden's attention.

"The hand-slicing whore?" Sarden furrowed his brow.

"We found her a few hours later at one of the water shacks. She smiled when she saw us. If she thought we were there for revenge, it didn't seem to bother her. She had a blade on her belt, a saber with a black hilt shaped like a scorpion. It looked well used.

"I asked her if she was interested in earning some money. She nodded. I asked her if she could fight. She didn't say anything but if I'm any judge of skill, she's got it. I asked if she wanted to fight in the arena. I told her I'd pay her five hundred daknars if she won or lost and call the situation with Gom even. She smiled and nodded."

"That's not a lot of money, are you sure she can fight?"

"Iben is pretty sure she can fight and even Gom thought it was a good idea. I think that cut on his hand attracted him more than her looks. She's a beauty too, the crowd will love her."

"The Kal isn't about to hold back because she's a woman." Sarden put his killer's stare back on Ataven. "She better hold up her own side of the fight."

"She will."

Sarden looked hard but then broke into a smile. "What's her name?"

"Vrenna."

Lines of merchants, tradesmen, servants of the Dans, and hundreds of slaves streamed from the huge wooden gates of the fortress city to the fighting pit. The pit had started as the beginning of a slave pit like the huge pits of Gazu Kadem, but the slavemasters gave up after hitting a rock surface too dense for a thousand slaves to dig ten feet. Sarden had purchased the broken pit and hosted the first fight between two condemned slaves twenty years earlier. It made him rich.

The arena could seat five thousand people on the fifty tiered steps of the pit. Carved doors on the walls of the pit's floor led to the staging areas where the fighters prepared. Temporary tents and carts circled the pit. Merchants and tradesmen sold everything from cheap alcohol, spoiling food, clothing, and other goods. Performers reenacted some of the more memorable fights with marionettes on strings. A beautiful woman wearing nothing but a red velvet bottom fastened with gold chain swung a whip over a pair of huge striped tigers as spectators stared at both her and the massive beasts with mouths open.

Twenty carts alone sold the Red Lotus. Nearly every spectator carried one of the addictive hallucinogenic flowers. The smell of camels, horses, and sweat filled the air. An orange haze hung in the afternoon sky. The red ball of the sun beat down hard.

Ataven sat on the third tier of stone benches in an area marked off for the owners of the fighters. He looked around the arena and the fifteen hundred spectators who had come to watch this mystery fight. Sarden expected at least two thousand more after Gom's victory earlier in the week but word of the huge fighter's wound and the replacement kept most spectators away. No one expected the mystery fighter to survive against the Kal.

Two of the Dan's had made it this day. Dan Verelza sat in her eastern reserved section. The fifty year old woman lounged on a red divan carried to the arena by her servants. Four huge men, naked to the waist and cowled in black, attended her. One held a bowl of fresh fruit within her reach while another massaged her shoulders.

Verelza wore a deep red robe cut low in the front to her waist. The orbs of her sagging breasts pressed against the tight fabric of the robe, but Verelza was smart enough to know that her own body would not attract those she desired. Twelve half naked women lounged on large silk pillows also brought to the arena. They giggled and cooed and cheered at the men around them. For Verelza, these pit fights were a vehicle for her to advertise her best stock. It worked well.

Dan Tott sat in his gold and silver throne in his southern section. The small man's sharp eyes darted from the merchants selling the Red Lotus to the wretches who crushed and inhaled them. Like Verelza, these fights gave him the chance to watch his business work in the open and on a large scale. Neither Tott nor Verelza had much interest in the fights themselves.

Ataven stood and walked down the steps to the pit's floor. Two guards, armored and helmeted in bronze and iron stood aside and let him pass into the western preparation area. A short tunnel led to a large room carved under the western rings of the outer arena. Iben sat on a chair in the corner of the room looking typically worried.

Vrenna stood in the center of the room twisting her hips, arching her back, and bending forward until her forehead touched her knees. She wore a small leather chest guard that exposed her shoulders and her waist. A small pair of breeches cut high on her legs. She pulled up the tops of her leather boots and pulled her leather gloves on harder. A band of leather tied her black hair back into a pony tail but stray locks of hair hung down the front of her face. Her pale blue eyes met Ataven's and he quickly looked away as he approached Iben.

"Is she ready?"

Iben shrugged. He looked more worried than usual. Beads of sweat stood out on his upper lip.

"What's wrong?"

"Do you know who she is?"

Ataven shrugged. "She calls herself Vrenna. She's a sellsword and a bandit. I think she's an ex-slave given the brand on her back." Ataven lowered his voice. "Who cares? The Kal will probably knock her out in the first or second round. She'll leave the city with a swollen eye and a purse full of daknars. She knows the risk."

"Did you see the marks on her neck?"

Ataven turned slowly and looked at Vrenna. She was raising her arms, palms out to the ceiling. He saw three horizontal black diamonds on the right side of her neck. He shrugged and shook his head at Iben. Iben put his head in his hands.

"We're in big trouble."

Ataven let out a snort and walked over to Vrenna. She had picked up the padded club, known as a kugesh. She was feeling its weight in her hand and tightening the leather hand strap.

"Do your best. The Kal is tough but he won't hurt you too badly. Try to keep your guard up and protect your face. He goes for the stomach a lot. That's an easy way out if you want it. Two or three hits and you can stay on the ground. We'll give you your pay right afterwards and you can be on your way."

Vrenna stared at Ataven with those cold eyes and he found himself looking at the dirt floor again. He nodded and headed back to his seat with Iben behind him.

The first gong crashed as Iben and Ataven sat in their seats. A roar rose from the spectators as the two pit fighters approached the center of the pit. The Kal came out of his door and raised his kugesh high as the cheers roared out. He stood nearly seven feet high. Tattoos burned across his chest and shoulders. His shaved head reflected in the red sunlight. He walked to the center of the ring and stopped in front of Vrenna.

She stood nearly a foot and a half shorter than the huge man but met his gaze with her own. Ataven could see the Kal's huge chest heaving in and out with deep breaths. He stood like a beast. Ataven hoped he didn't kill the poor woman.

The second gong sounded and the fight began.

The gong's echo had not finished its ring before the fight had ended.

Some said Vrenna had made the tiniest of movements with her left leg, just barely enough to get the Kal's attention Ataven and most of the audience had missed the twitch completely. All they saw was the flash of Vrenna's kugesh as she smashed it in the center of the Kal's lower jaw. A half a second later, the crack of bone reached their ears. The Kal stepped back and dropped his unswung kugesh. His hand went to his mouth where a river of blood and teeth splattered to the ground like rain. He stumbled and fell unconscious onto his back.

"I'll get the horses and two weeks of food" Iben was already packing his meager belongings.

"Iben."

"We can head south to Gazu Katar. Or north to Hammerfoot. I still have a brother who command's the emperor's southern army. He still wants me dead but its safer there than here."

"Iben. If Sarden wanted us dead we never would have made it here." Ataven saw this idea dawn in Iben's eyes but then Iben looked with horror over Ataven's shoulder.

"Well said."

Ataven wheeled around and saw Sarden standing in the doorway flanked by two of his thick-muscled bodyguards. Ataven's bladder nearly let go. Daggers shined from their leather belts.

"Where's the jawbreaking handslashing whore?"

"She disappeared after the fight." Ataven wasn't lying. He wasn't sure he could lie if he wanted to. "I don't know where she is."

Sarden walked up to Ataven and kept that murderous gaze on him. Ataven was sure he would feel a steel knife slide into his belly.

"Find her." Sarden let the words sink in. "thousands of daknars already change hands anticipating her next fight. If she disappears we could lose even more than we lost today. Find her and get her back into that pit. She will fight Binda so we will be sure this time." Ataven had seen Binda fight three times and even with Vrenna's display this afternoon, Ataven couldn't believe for a second that the tall dark woman wouldn't tear Vrenna into pieces. "They will fight with gandasses. Tell the whore that Binda will take her time before attacking."

"She will?"

"No. Binda will kill her as fast as she broke the Kal's jaw today." Sarden pulled his cloak over his shoulders and back into the dusk air. His huge bodyguards followed him out.

"This is so bad." Iben collapsed on his small cot, his possessions forgotten in his hands. Ataven knew exactly how he felt.

The crowd had doubled since the last fight. Sarden's fights were usually long and dramatic, but they were always predictable. Sarden liked them that way but the chaos Vrenna had brought to the pit fights drew a huge crowd. The people wanted to see the pit fighter who had so easily sent the Kal into a coma with his jaw split in two.

People crowded next to each other on the stone benches. Most held their crushed red flowers to their bosoms. Red stains marked their mouths and noses. A thick haze filled their eyes.

All four Dans had shown for this fight. Dan Verelza, now wearing a tiny bikini of gold and silver, gently stroked the thick muscled arm of a masked giant standing next to her divan. Dan Tott looked sharp over the audience. Dan Lest sat on a huge throne of stone and iron shaped like a hand reaching out of the ground. Deep lines cut into the thin man's face and his thin black and gray hair hung loose on his shoulders. He wore an embroidered tunic that cost more than the price of five hundred slaves. Nearly two hundred servants and slaves sat submissively around the most powerful lord of the city.

Even Dan Surel made this event. The bandit lord had the smallest entourage of any of the lords, less than two dozen men. These men drank from iron flagons and roared with laughter at each other. They wore dust-caked tunics of cotton and boiled leather. Tall riding boots covered their legs to the knee and curved sabers hung loose on their hips. The other spectators gave the small group of bandits a wide breadth.

Dan Surel himself wore a boiled leather breastplate scarred from countless battles. He wore his long black hair in a braid down the center of his back. His eyes spoke of cunning and the thin smile on his lips spoke clearly of mischief. Though quite rich from his trades and discoveries, Dan Surel was more interested in adventure than money.

Beads of sweat itched Ataven's forehead. He looked at the crowd and at the four lords. He began to head to the room where Vrenna prepared but changed his mind and stepped towards the room where Benda prepared.

Ataven saw fast moving shadows before he reached the doorway. Benda's torch lit silhouette moved in speed and grace. She shifted and turned her tall frame like a dancer. Sweat glistened off of her brown skin. The two curved blades, the gandasses, swam in the air. They spun and darted in faster than Ataven could see. When she finished

her dance she stood and glared at Ataven with the eyes of an animal.

Benda was of the deep southern desert tribes, once a slave but now trained by the best blade masters in six cities. She was tall and dark skinned with a shaved head and a well muscled body. She wore a loose pair of breeches cut off mid-thigh and a band of cloth across her small breasts. She held the two gandasses like extensions of her own hand. She might have been beautiful but any lustful thoughts were quickly pushed aside by her aura of pure murderous rage.

That rage had proved itself many times. Benda had dismembered and disemboweled twelve men far larger than she. She had once torn out a man's throat with her teeth. While the pit fights rarely went to the death these days, it was far more profitable to keep good fighters alive than to retrain slaves every ten days, Benda had killed more than half of those she fought. Seeing her today, Ataven was convinced she would kill another today. Ataven turned and left. He crossed the arena avoiding the center of the pit and entered the opposite stone preparation room.

Vrenna was asleep. Iben sat in the corner looking miserable. Ataven was stunned. This woman would likely die today and she was asleep? Ataven approached the bunk where she lay but her eyes opened before he could contemplate shaking her awake.

Vrenna sat up and twisted her head with three audible cracks. She stood and rotated her hips. She yawned and fixed the tops of her boots and the waist of her leather breeches. She walked over to the room's only table and picked up the two curved blades that sat waiting for her. She ran a thumb along the blade's edge and frowned. She swung the heavy left blade in a circle and then looked at the side of the blade. As she examined the grain of the poor quality iron, her frown turned into a smile. She turned and walked out of the arena. Cheers roared as she stepped outside.

Ataven and Iben rushed to their seats as the pit master spewed out arcane rules no one ever followed. Ataven saw Sarden's cold look from the pit lord's throne. Any of Ataven's questions about the severity of the outcome of this match were answered in Sarden's eyes. Ataven turned back to the pit.

Benda stood tall over Vrenna, her muscles flexing under her dark skin. She held both of her gandasses in her hands out to her sides. She moved her weight from one foot to the other.

Vrenna stood relaxed, breathing deep and slow. Her eyes never left Benda. The two pit fighters stood silently and unmoving even after the first gong sounded and the fight began. Nearly a minute passed without either woman moving. Silence blanketed the entire arena. Hot wind blew clouds of red dust across the pit.

None could say who swung first. Both women crashed together, steel on steel as all four blades smashed against another. One of Vrenna's blades shattered down to a jagged stub past the guard. She held the other blade high over her head. Ataven saw a gleam of red on the stub of her broken sword.

Benda held both of her blades in a cross in front of her. Her eyes were wild and her white teeth clenched together in a twisted grimace.

Benda stumbled. A great jet of blood erupted from the inside of her left thigh. She dropped both blades and stumbled back, her hands grasping at the gushing wound in her thigh. Blood pumped through her hands as she fell to the ground among her clattering blades.

The crowd was silent. Vrenna raised the two swords; one intacted, the other shattered and blody; and dropped them to the pit's floor. Benda quivered as blood continued to pump into a dark red pool from the wound.

The crowd exploded into cheer. Ataven looked up and saw Dan Surel's men roaring and smashing iron flagons together. Dan Surel himself stood and bowed to Vrenna. Ataven saw Vrenna smile back.

The roar boomed in Ataven's ears. He saw the fury in Sarden's eyes. Ataven felt like he was going to throw up. His eyes focused on the shattered hilt, the hilt that had pierced Benda's inner thigh. Vrenna had known the blade would break. She knew exactly how to use it to slip past Benda's guard. Ataven was in shock.

They broke his arm first and that had been a blessing. He was numb as they punched and kicked him. He could feel the bone in his forearm twisting in wrong directions but it didn't hurt. He passed out twice but they brought him back with splashes of sun-heated water in his face.

Sarden watched while sipping a clay cup of spiced tea. Ataven saw Iben curled into a ball but they hadn't beaten the northerner as badly as Sarden.

"This is a big embarrassment." Sarden said quietly. "To be honest, I don't know exactly what to do. I can kill you and that bitch you brought in but the people won't forget what she did. Everyone's talking about it. I could kill you and hire her as my own fighter but she has embarrassed me twice already. She needs to be beaten. I want her gone from this city and gone from the minds of the retches living here.

"So I'm going to have mercy." Sarden stood and put a foot on Ataven's broken arm. Ataven could feel the bone grinding into his tendons. "Did you know she is a slave? She has the brand of a Gazu Kadem slave on her back. Imagine what Dan Lest would do if he knew?

"Tell her she can leave this city after the next fight. I won't kill her or hand her to Lest, but she must be punished. She must let Gendor the Snake punish her. She must fall after the third ring, not before.

"If she falls early or by some chance she beats Gendor, I will kill you and send her to Lest with a broken back."

It had been hard to find her but surprisingly easy to convince Vrenna that one more fight would keep Lest's hounds off of her. The fight was going to be bare-handed, no weapons, so she would likely walk away from the failure intact. When Ataven told her that she had to lose, and lose after the third gong, her unblinking eyes burned into him. Then she let out a deep breath and nodded.

Iben was wrapping Vrenna's fists in strips of leather. Vrenna stared off towards the doorway of the preparation room and into the short hallway that led to the pit. Above them the dull roar of the crowd boomed. Nearly ten thousand had showed up for today's battle and more money had changed hands on the outcome of the fight than in the last year of fights. Sarden stood to be a rich man when this ended and even Ataven, Iben, and Vrenna stood to walk away with full purses.

"Fight him, but don't let him put you down until the third gong. Defend yourself until then. After the third gong, drop to the sands and we will all walk away from this intact. I don't want to die, Vrenna, and I am sure you don't want to go back to Gazu Kadem.

"Gendor is slippery like a snake. He is rich but spends most of his time traveling and learning the fighting arts of the old empire. Don't let his size fool you, he is cunning. You will have to stand your guard strong to last until the third gong."

Ataven looked at Vrenna and then Iben. He spoke to both of them.

"I am sorry."

The spectators slapped the stone seats of the overcrowded arena in succession. The sound echoed across Tog Veel. Ataven walked around the pit to the other preparation room, marveling at the vast sea of people surrounding the center of the pit like a storm. The roar of the crowd followed him as he walked down the short hall and into Gendor's room.

Gendor was a small man with dark golden skin. He wore loose white pants tied at his waist. When Ataven entered, Gendor was in a full back bridge, his nose touching the floor and his feet flat. His leather wrapped hands were crossed across his chest. His stomach was high in the air and his back bent in a perfect upside down U. As Ataven watched, Gendor twisted, spun on his head, and sprung to his feet. His hands never touched the ground.

Gendor took two small easy steps while smiling at Ataven. He arched back and landed on one hand, his legs spinning out and high in the air. He landed in a low crouch, three fingers and his two big toes keeping the rest of his body suspended over the ground. He threw one leg over the other and was face up again, spinning on his shoulder. He fell into full splits, dropped forward onto his stomach, arched his legs over his body like the tail of a scorpion, and arched again until he came to a standing position. He smiled again. His black curled hair glistening with beads of sweat.

"Are we ready?" Sarden's rasped voice seemed sick next to the beauty of Gendor's movements. The small scarred man sat in the corner, his killer eyes unmoving.

"Yes." Ataven felt his heart pumping in his chest.

Gendor breathed deeply and exhaled. "Let's begin."

The crowd doubled their volume when the two pit fighters stepped forward. For the first time in her short career, Vrenna stood half a head taller than her opponent. She held her leather wrapped hands at her sides and slightly out waiting for the gong to start. Gendor shifted his weight from one foot to the other, breathing in deep breaths. He ran a hand through his shaggy hair and smiled. Ataven felt electricity and tension in the air like a steel spring.

The gong crashed over the arena, echoing in the southern mountains.

Vrenna's left hand shot out perfectly straight and hit Gendor in the jaw. He stumbled backward. Ataven felt his heart stop and the crowd went silent. Gander shook his head, spit out a wad of blood, and smiled again. He raised his hands to his face and his eyes blazed with black fire.

Gendor exploded into motion, darting in to Vrenna's lower left but then changing position, springing and spinning into the air, and landing the heel of his right foot across her jaw. The blow knocked Vrenna's head back but she held up. She shot out her own foot as Gendor landed but the man spun to the side and the blow missed.

The two pit fighters circled each other. Vrenna kept her stance low. Gendor shifted his weight from foot to foot. Gendor spun low with a kick to Vrenna's knee. She easily back stepped and dodged the left punch that followed. Both attacks were a ruse, Ataven realized, when Gendor's sharp elbow hit Vrenna in the center of her chest.

Gendor followed the strike with two more lightning fast punches but neither landed as Vrenna backed out of their range, sliding on her bare feet. Gendor sprung forward into a roll but the toe of Vrenna's foot punched neatly into his stomach has he sprung up.

Dozens of attacks, feigns, blocks, and dodges flew between the two combatants. When the first gong crashed, both Gendor and Vrenna breathed heavily. They stepped back and breathed deep. The gong crashed again and the battle resumed.

Punches and kicks flew. Vrenna threw a flurry of attacks as Gendor spun and twisted his body in impossible angles. He moved like liquid against the rock of her attacks. Vrenna spun with a heel aimed at Gendor's head but the small man arched back into a handstand. His feet spun in the air and one kicked Vrenna in the face, knocking her back and sending a stream of blood into the air.

In the stands, Dan Surel and his bandits roared in glee. All of them stood and cheered as the battle raged. Never had there been a fight this dramatic in the pits. Never had two combatants been so perfectly matched. When the second gong sounded, the whole stadium was standing, clapping, and cheering.

Vrenna stood with her hands clenched at her sides. Blood flowed from a cut above her eye and trickled from the corner of her mouth. One of Gendor's eyes had swollen shut and his body was covered with welts and bruises. His smile had never left his face.

The third gong crashed. Ataven held his breath and saw Sarden doing the same. Vrenna and Gendor circled around one another again, both breathing hard. Gendor threw a punch followed by a spinning kick to Vrenna's stomach. She dodged the kick and threw a sharp elbow into his kidney. His head smashed into Vrenna's chin rocking her back.

Then it happened.

Gendor dropped low and sprung high, his fist arching in a straight line into the heavens. It caught Vrenna under the chin and sent her into the air. Her head whipped back and then forward as her body went horizontal in the air, nearly four feet off the ground. Time seemed to slow as she fell. Ataven saw Gendor's clenched jaw and the leather wrapped fist that had taken Vrenna off of her feet. Vrenna hit the ground hard, arms and legs sprawled out. Her head lolled to one side, her eyes open and glassy.

The crowd roared. Gendor stood over the woman panting. His fists held to his side. Ataven let his breath out. He looked at Sarden and saw the man smiling. Sarden looked to Ataven and nodded. All was forgiven. Ataven looked back to Vrenna, hoping she was still alive. He saw her eyes shift and meet his own. Vrenna winked and a smile crossed her face.

No one saw the transition. She was laying on the ground one moment, prone and broken. Next she had rolled into a kneel and struck out hard with her right hand. The blow caught Gendor perfectly in the center of his chest. Ataven heard the crack of his sternum. Gendor stumbled backward. He wasn't breathing. His eyes clouded over and his crushed heart no longer pumped blood through his veins. He stood for five or six seconds, but everyone who looked at him knew the man was dead. He fell onto his back like a stiff board. His hands did not break his fall and his head cracked on the hard ground of the pit.

Vrenna had killed Gendor with a single punch. She could have done it at any time but she waited until this very moment, the moment when Sarden expected her to go down and stay down. She had taken a beating for a quarter of an hour just so she could insult Sarden completely. Now they were all going to die.

Ataven nearly blacked out. He felt Iben grab his arm and pull him through the crowds. The world was a haze, blurring as they met Vrenna in the rush of people and fled through a network of tunnels from the arena to the city. Ataven felt as though he floated on a thick cloud. His legs felt like someone else's as they stepped into a dark alley where Iben hoped to meet three horses.

Sarden stood in the center of the alley. Four large men stood with the little lord. Two more met Iben, Ataven, and Vrenna from behind, prodding them forward with steel daggers. Sarden's eyes burned. He had had enough.

"Kill them."

Ataven barely heard the statement. Questions continued to flow through his mind. Why had she done that? Why would she get them all killed just to insult Sarden? Why would she gamble with their lives like that?

Then Vrenna showed that she had clearly bent the odds in their favor.

Ataven heard steel slide from oil and heard gurgling from behind him. Something warm and wet splashed on the back of his neck. The shadows in the alley came alive. Steel glimmered in the afternoon sun. The tips of curved blades burst from two of the men standing next to Sarden. A small thin spear soared past and planted cleanly into the throat of another. The last turned to run but three blades whispered in the alley and he fell to the ground gripping at his flayed belly and severed knee.

Dan Surel stepped into the alley. The shadows stepped into the light and Ataven recognized them. They were the bandits who cheered in the pit. Dan Surel had his own saber drawn, an impressive white steel blade adorned with a gold and silver hilt shaped like twin lions. He turned to Ataven.

"Your pit fighter met me last night. She told me you had been put in an awkward spot and would be interested in a negotiation. Pit fights never interested me too much but I liked what I saw today and I'm in the mood to expand. Here is what I propose:

"You work for me now. You will manage the fights for me and I will take four fifths of what comes in." Dan Surel's voice was as cool as the steel he carried. "You arrange the fights, you manage the fighters. I will come once a month and take what you owe."

"What?" Sarden's rasping voice cracked. Dan Surel spun and cut. Blood sprayed form Sarden's cleanly cut throat. He was still gasping and gurgling on the ground as Surel continued the conversation.

"Vrenna told me this proposition would interest you. She said you had little choice." Dan Surel looked around at the grim men around him. "It appears she is right. Do we agree?"

Ataven wasn't stupid. He wasn't stupid when he took over Sarden's palace and paid his servants and guards twice what Sarden had paid. He even managed to bring in Rev as his second assistant next to Iben and personal bodyguard. Rev became fanatically loyal to him. In ten years he would be a Dan of Tog Veel, the first Lord of the Pit Fights. He wasn't stupid and it would end up making him rich.

"We agree."

"I only have one final demand." Dan Surel smiled. He turned to Vrenna and Vrenna smiled back.

"Vrenna comes with me."

Author's Notes: The seed for Pit Fighter came from the movie Snatch by Guy Richie. I thought it would be fun to have Vrenna willingly fall into the politics and dangers of the pit fights. I worried that the end might be too deus ex machina; that God just sort of comes out and saves them. Instead, I have an unwritten scene where Vrenna approaches Dan Surel and the bandit lords and makes a deal with them. The payment would be her companionship on the road ahead in Vrenna and the Bandit Lords. This story ended up being a lot harder than I thought from simple character motivation. Why do they do what they do? That's the hard part of most stories and it seems best to let them do what they would do instead of shoving them the way you want them to go.

The Weapon

Col. John Richardson glanced down at the instrument panel of the XS-1 space plane but the real excitement was just outside the two-inch-thick windows in front of him. The blue sky above them spread aside like a curtain revealing a black sky and yellow sun brighter than

it ever appeared on Earth. John looked right and saw Lt. Col. Frank Goudere studying fuel meters, thrust calculations, and watching hull integrity statistics. The young African American had little use for the great view as the blue sky tore open to black empty space.

Captain Albert Janis, the plane's engineer, and their special guest, Dr. Mark Galahan, PhD in 20th century history and political science from Berkley, both gazed in wonder as their space plane broke the vice like grip of Earth's atmosphere and fell into an easy orbit around the giant blue sphere they called home.

"Col. Goudere, how do things look?"

"No problems, sir. This thing really flies itself." Frank shrugged. "I can't help but feel like a passenger instead of a navigator."

"It's not like the Columbia, is it."

"Not at all."

Both Frank and John looked at the ship's control panel. 95% of the original space shuttle controls were removed or replaced with a far sparser and user friendly console. The two pilots had to be completely retrained in simulators and even live runs within the Earth's atmosphere in the new space plane's control systems. It felt wrong. This whole mission felt wrong.

"Houston, we broke out and fell into orbit. We will reach our bogey in..." Frank glanced at the blue monitor to his left. "twenty minutes." A hiss of radio interference gave way to the voice of the ground control commander acknowledging the message.

"Captain Janis? Want to get ready?"

"Yes sir." Albert Janis, a small twenty-six year old blond man unstrapped his five-point harness and floated back to the cargo door behind the four command seats. He unsealed the circular door and floated back into the small cargo space of the ship. It was hard to miss the big grin on his face.

John looked over to Dr. Galahan. The forty five year old history professor sat and gazed out of his port window into the deep vastness of space. What was the man doing here? He had no science background, no military experience, and he barely passed the physical. The mission commander demanded it. Two military advisers and a Soviet-era veteran of the Russian space program demanded it.

The doctor was an expert in a field that may be required, that was as much as they would tell him.

"Our bogey is right ahead of us. We're ten minutes out."

John looked out the front window. He could already see it. They were nearly two hundred kilometers away but he could already see the sun reflecting off of the thirty meter cylinder. It was huge.

"Al, how are things?" John spoke into he microphone at his neck.

"Good to go, sir. The arm's ready." Al's voice hissed over the ship's intercom. The cylinder grew in the view port. Frank fired the space plane's retro rockets and the ship slowed down. The cylinder dwarfed their ship as they got closer.

"Grab it when you can, Al." John looked out of his right view port and saw the thin robotic arm extend to the huge cylinder. A red hammer and sickle burned bright in the harsh sunlight.

The three men in the space plane's cockpit stared at the huge black satellite. What could a forty year old satellite that big possibly hold? They knew it was some sort of weapon, perhaps biological. It was too old to be Nuclear. The small Soviet science and military group had launched it in the late nineteen fifties, right in the middle of the space race. The rocket that brought it into orbit must have been huge. John never heard of the Soviets having a rocket big enough to launch a satellite this big into orbit that far back in history.

Now the huge satellite's orbit had decayed considerably. They launched this train engine into space but not high enough. Now it threatened to crash down somewhere in Africa and it was up to them to boost its orbit and launch it into the sun. When the Soviets learned of the decaying orbit, they came straight to NASA and asked for help.

The magnetic hand of the robotic arm touched the side of the satellite and John felt his ship jar as the ship's speed and direction became that of the seventy year old satellite.

"Suit up, Frank."

"You got it." Frank unbuckled his five-point harness and floated back into the cargo bay. A minute later a large monitor on the console burst into colored light as Frank's helmet camera began broadcasting images of the cargo bay.

"Can you read me?" Frank's voice swept over the cabin of the ship.

"Five by five, Frank. Good hunting."

John watched Frank, dressed in a full space suit, climbing the arm horizontally to the huge cylinder. On the view screen, John saw each rung of and the white gloves that carefully grasped them as Frank made his way across deep space to the black object. A large hose snaked out behind him. Al gave Frank instructions over the intercom as the space-walker climbed.

Frank reached the surface of the huge cylinder and attached another magnetic block hooked to a long tether on his belt. He stood and walked on magnetic boots on the surface of the cylinder. He held another large hose in his hands, a hose attached to ten thousand gallons of liquid oxygen. The hose ended in a special adapter suited to the fuel tanks of the Soviet satellite. Frank attached the hose and hundreds of gallons of liquid oxygen flowed into the satellite's empty tanks.

"I'm heading in to start it up." Frank walked around the circumference of the satellite. John never got used to the site of a man walking sideways and facing down. Frank reached a circular portal on the bottom of the satellite. He turned a huge wheel three times around. The seal broke and a blast of seventy year old air blasted out.

"It was a vacuum inside, right?" asked Frank.

"Yes. That was just about a liter of trapped oxygen that leaked out." answered John.

Frank grasped the sides of the portal and slid inside. As Frank left their view from the view port, John and Mark watched the monitor relaying Frank's helmet camera. Frank's light revealed the inside of the cylinder. It was one huge room lined with pipes and analog gauges. Another cylinder, tethered by a network of cords and cables, dominated the center of the hollow center of the satellite. The cylinder stretched four meters long and two meters in diameter. It appeared to be made of iron or steel. A single black word marked its surface, but the symbol below them sent silence cross the four viewers.

It was a black swastika on a field of white and red.

"What the hell?" Frank's voice was the first to break the silence.

"Doctor?" John twisted back to look at Dr. Galahan.

"I have no idea. The Germans were close to building a nuclear weapon but they never had finished."

John looked at the word above the Nazi flag. "Damon? What does that mean?"

"It means demon."

Silence once again filled the cockpit. After a few moments, John retook control of the situation.

"Our orders are to fuel this big ugly thing up and shoot it into the sun. Frank, go start it up." Frank's camera lingered on the canister's cap and the wheel on its end. "Frank."

"Yes, sir." The camera moved off of the canister and over to the antique control panel. Four or five button presses later and the console burst into light. Frank began setting gauges and pressing buttons as he programmed in the navigational orders. John saw the thrusters on the huge cylinder move. That was a relief. They had four portable thrusters in the cargo bay but NASA hoped to use the satellite's own system to launch it out of orbit and towards the sun.

"Frank, set the remote launch box. Al will begin the launch once we have detached and reached a safe distance."

Frank finished programming the ancient Soviet computer and attached a box over part of the control network. He moved out towards the portal but his view lingered on the canister. John saw his respiration go up on his bio meters.

"I have to see."

"No, Frank. We have no idea what is in there. Come back to the ship, that's an order."

"We're in a vacuum and I'm in a suit."

"Bring your man back, Colonel." Dr. Galahan's voice shook.

"Frank, get back now."

"I have to see." Frank's hands grasped the wheel of the canister's seal He began to turn it.

"Frank."

The wheel continued to turn. The seal broke and a gust of white dust sprayed out. The lid opened. A black hole revealed nothing until Frank got his light to shine down into the canister. Curled against the back of the canister was a black skinned figure.

"It's a body. Why would the Russians shoot a Nazi body into space?"

The body moved. The entire crew of four men cried out. On Frank's camera, the head turned up and faced him. It had no mouth or nose, just a pair of wide black eyes streaked with silver in a perfectly smooth head. It reached out a long arm and extended long fingers with too many joints. John saw the depths of hell in those eyes.

Frank screamed over the intercom. The speaker in the cabin clipped out as the volume grew too great. John saw Frank's gloved hand reach up and his scream cut off as he pulled out his own air hose. An explosion of blood and brains sprayed across the view screen's camera. Mark turned and retched, particles of breakfast floating in the cockpit.

John saw the silver-black eyes of the creature shining with malevolence.

A deep thud woke John from the creature's gaze. He saw the magnetic arm detach from the hull of the huge satellite. A deep rumble shook the plane as white fire burst from the black Soviet satellite's thrusters roared to life.

John sat stunned as the cylinder roared away from them and towards the sun.

"It's gone." Al's voice sounded calm over the ship's intercom.

"Close up, Al. I'll contact Houston and let them know about the accident."

For the following weeks, John and the others stuck to the same story. Frank's air hose got caught in the portal of the satellite and a faulty seal broke free too easily. John stuck to this story during the six month congressional investigation that followed and each of the forty television interviews he did. He didn't even mention it a year later in the note he left before putting the barrel of the .38 revolver in his mouth.

Author's Notes: I wrote this yarn, originally titled "Nazi Space Demon", in a boring meeting one day. I based it off of a "what if" from seeing that horrible movie, "Space Cowboys". I kept thinking, well after I

discovered that the Russian satelite was actually a weapon, how cool would it be if it actually had a captured Nazi demon they found in Berlin at the end of WW2? The story is meant to be a little Bradbury-like but those are big shoes to fill.

Vrenna and the Bandit Lords

For six weeks not a single living thing crossed the Southride. Hot wind ripped across the hard packed sand. The red sun rose over the flatlands of hte east and set over the western ridges of the jagged mountains called Thar's Jaw.

The sun rose and set uncaring of the land it burned below. Thousands of years earlier, armies clashed spear tips against iron armor and screamed to forgotten gods as their blood spilled across ground that had once been green. The red sun baked their bodies dry to white bone. Now the winds carved the years against huge stone monuments that marked the Southride from the burning desert around it.

After six weeks of dead quiet, hoofbeats pounded against the hard earth. They appeared as seven shadows on the horizon of the north, their shadows growing long as the sun set. They broke the silence with thunder minutes later, iron showed hooves tearing into the dead earth. Sunlight gleamed off of mail tunics and steel hilts. Brown hoods pulled low hid their faces in shadow. Dust colored cloaks whipped behind them as the seven bandit lords roared past. A cloud of dust rose in their wake as they thundered south into the early night.

They were gone minutes later. The dust settled and the cool night winds blew over the Southride. Weeks more would pass before any other living creature would ride down the forgotten road under the silent and uncaring sun.

Andar Dasson wiped his sleeve against his wet brow. Even as dusk turned to night, the heat of the ride, the hard ride that Dan Gendus Surel seemed to prefer to all others, made sweat drip down off of Andar's face. They had ridden for two days since leaving Tog Veel, the fortress city where Dan Surel ruled as one of the four lords of the corrupt city, and where they had picked up their seventh companion.

Andar turned and pulled back the edge of his hood to look at the woman now riding with them. She wore leather breeches tucked into the tops of her tall leather riding boots. A leather chestguard exposed her belly and left her arms bare. A saber hung on her waist, the hilt shaped like the body of a scorpion with the curved tail acting as a

hand guard. She gripped her reigns in black leather gloves. She had pulled her hood back when the huge red sun fell behind the western mountains and her raven black hair swam in the wind. Andar squinted and again saw the three black marks on her neck, three horizontal diamonds one on top of the other. The woman turned and met Andar's gaze. Her eyes seemed to glow blue-white in the dusk of night. Andar quickly looked away and focused his eyes on Denel, the man who rode ahead of him.

They stopped to set up camp an hour later when the night completely blanketed the road in darkness. Andar swung his leg over his brown mare and collapsed into a heap when his feet touched the ground. He could feel his pulse throbbing from his groin to his toes as he lay on the ground. The familiar grunts of laughter from the others as they set up camp. Havoted's two hands gripped Andar's wrists and the bandit pulled Andar's round body to his feet with a grunt.

The fire crackled, sending orange sparks and gray smoke into the night air. Denel held a skillet filled with sizzling meat and popping oil. It filled the chilled air with the smell of seasonings and cooked sausages. They would eat well for the next few days as their fresh supplies from Tog Veel lasted. In a week it would be back to tough salted meats and whatever they found in the desert which was often little.

Denel's twin brother, Havoted, took care of the horses, wiping them down and feeding them from bags of grain. He and Denel looked mostly the same, but Havoted took to shaving his head bare while Denel chose to wear his hair long in three braids down his back. The laws of the bandit lords let any bandit wear what he wished as long as he did so with confidence.

Dan Surel, his own long black hair in a single thick braid down his back, talked with Kasavar, second of the Dust Rider Bandit Lords. Kasavar stood nearly a head taller than Dan Surel, but he nodded and looked to the Dust Rider leader with loyalty and admiration in his every nod. Kasavar also shaved his head and had tattooed it with a strange pattern of black fire that went down his bare muscled back. Andar remembered Kasavar holding a ragged knife to Andar's throat when they had first met. The huge man would have opened Andar like a fish if Dan Surel had not stayed his hand. Dan Surel had an eye for talent and though Andar looked soft and beyond the years of any good bandit, Dan Surel had found Andar's talent soon enough. The Dust Riders had earned more in the past three months than they had in ten years previously. It had made them all very rich men in any of the

cities of the southern deserts. It all came from Andar's appraisals of the goods they found. Andar would not have expected his understanding of history to find use here, but he was the only one of his party left alive after the Dust Riders had ambushed them. His understanding of history saved his life and made the Dust Riders rich.

The little one, Ca'Naan, stretched his arms to the sky. The boy was perhaps fifteen but his tight muscles showed the effects of constant training. Andar watched the boy arch back until his palms touched the ground before pushing himself into a handstand. Another push and he was back on his feet again. His body was sleek and strong.

"Brother," Havoted shouted from the horses. "Why did we not sell the little one to that foppish flabby lord who so wished to buy him as a personal body slave?" Ca'Naan, well within ear shot, shook his head at the jest.

"Dan Surel did not want to give him a job he would enjoy so much." Denel retorted. It was an easy joke in a continuing string of jokes aimed at the boy since Andar had ridden with them. Ca'Naan ignored them and continued his exercises.

"Why do you two ride the boy so hard?" Andar dared to ask Denel. At first he feared Denel would answer by throwing a hot skillet of bubbling fat into his face but Denel smiled.

"We should do it while we can." Denel looked at Ca'Naan and Andar was surprised to see admiration and compassion in those hard bandit eyes. "That boy will lead us someday."

"Dustriders, gather." Dan Surel stepped closer to the fire, the towering form of Kasavar behind him and to his right. Havoted, Ca'Naan, and the ghost-eyed woman; Vrenna they had called her; approached the fire.

"We head east tomorrow, into the Ash Planes," said Dan Surel.

Havoted scratched his dark stubble. "It's five hundred leagues of flat desert out that way."

"It isn't the desert that we care about," Kasavar answered from behind Dan Surel. Any debate between Dan Surel and Kasavar had already occurred. "It is what lies beneath."

"Last night I met a commander of Dan Trex's army." Dan Surel sat down in front of the fire. "Trex has sent a great number of slaves and

soldiers into the desert to the east at great expense. The commander heard rumors that he was sent by the king of Gazu Kadem and others that Dan Trex sent these men on his own coin. They apparently seek an amulet lost in the deserts for a great time. It is a piece of great value both as a royal heirloom and in hard coin.

"If it is important enough for Dan Trex to spend even half of what he apparently has, I would certainly like to see this amulet."

"And what of this commander?" asked Havoted.

"The poor fellow was robbed and killed in the alley outside of a pleasurehouse. Too much drink, flowerdust, and women it appears, and too many valuables in his pockets." Dan Surel smiled.

"Andar." Dan Surel's dark eyes grabbed Andar like a steel grip. The lord of the Dustriders pulled a rolled up scroll of vellum from his belt and tossed it to Andar. "Can you read this?"

Andar unrolled the scroll. It was a map. At least four different hands had inked it over a period of many years. Andar could make out at least two different languages, one used by the smugglers of the eastern sea and one a broken form of the street language of the southern desert cities. Words and phrases from the high language of the old empire also appeared from time to time.

"I can."

"Then our lives lay in your hands, bookreader." Dan Surel smiled. Havoted groaned.

"Where will we find this amulet?" Denel poked at the simmering sausages in the black iron skillet.

"I am not sure." Dan Surel continued to smile. "We will find our answers in the desert."

Andar had heard of the warlord, Dan Trex, before. Rumors said that the ex-slave now led the largest army in the south deserts. Even Andar's old employers, the northern Faigon spymasters from the tower of the Eye, knew of Dan Trex. Andar's gaze moved to the fair skinned woman sitting cross-legged, her sword across her lap. Firelight burned in her eyes and those eyes once again met Andar's gaze. He quickly looked away.

They left early the next morning. Dan Surel led a slow pace. It would

get hot in the desert and to lose a horse meant losing their lives. They stopped often and let Andar study the thin-skinned map. Every minute he studied that map, Andar grew more and more interested.

The map looked at least two hundred years old. His fingers traced the network of lines and the old text that marked landmarks now buried under the desert. An entire layer of the map's ink, probably the oldest and most interesting of the layers,appeared to be washed over and overwritten with a layer of text recording a prayer hymn to one of the strange dark gods of the old empire. This layer had also been washed and overwritten in the scribbled lines that marked the current map.

Andar imagined the hands that drew each of the layers of this ancient scroll. Smears of dark brown could only be the faint traces of blood. What mysteries this scroll held.

They camped within the gaps between hills of white sand and packed red clay. The fire burned low and meat sizzled on Denel's skillet. Kasavar sat with the other Dustriders laughing and sharing tales of past exploits. The huge man spoke of the robbery of a noble couple from the north. The noble woman's jewelry alone kept the Dustriders in the finest food, lodging, and women that Tog Veel had to offer. The woman's constant abuse to her broken and sorrowful husband bit sharper than any blade, so the Dustriders had let them go with horses, food, and water. Kasavar laughed and said a quick death for the man may have been more merciful than the old woman's bites for two their two thousand mile journey back north. No man should have to endure that woman's tongue lashing.

Even Andar laughed at theirs story and Havoted slapped him on the back. It was a sad observation but Andar felt more at home among these bandits than he did with anyone in nearly twenty years. They were thieves and scoundrels and murderers, but they were honest with each other and honest with him.

Andar looked off and saw Dan Surel sitting with the swordswoman, Vrenna on one of the red hills. Andar heard Dan Surel laugh lightly in the night breeze. They whispered there throughout the meal. As the night fell deeper, the two slipped off into Dan Surel's deerskin tent.

Andar woke to the sound of Ca'Naan riding off before sunrise to scout ahead along their path. He came back three hours later, his voice riding high in his full gallop. His cries broke the silence of the camp. Dan Surel came out of his tent naked to the waist. The hilt of his lion-hilted broadsword shone golden in the morning sun. Vrenna came out

behind him wearing nothing at all. Her black scorpion hilted saber hung loose in her hand. Her untied black hair and the three diamonds on her neck contrasted her smooth ivory skin.

Her beauty did not impact Andar nearly as much as the deadly look in her eyes. As attractive as she was, every step she took whispered of silent death. Her body was as much a weapon as the sword in her hand. She was not simply beautiful, she was lethal.

Ca'Naan dismounted in a single fluid motion, skidding on his soft leather boots as he came to a stop. Like Andar, Ca'Naan saw the danger within Vrenna and wisely kept his eyes on Dan Surel.

"Twenty men armed and armored ride north of us. They head in our same direction. They carry the standard of a gauntleted fist holding a skull."

Dan Surel looked to Kasavar.

"Riders of Dan Trex." The two men shared a silent conversation and both men smiled. "Let us parlay with these men and learn what we can."

Havoted groaned. Everyone knew what that meant. The Dustriders never parlayed with anyone. Denel smiled at Andar.

"I never liked Dan Thex's men anyway, arrogant sons of whores."

They dressed and broke camp with perfect efficiency and coordination. They rode hard north east, the dusty wind whipping at their cloaks.

They spotted the cloud of dust to the north three hours later just west of a jagged peak of rocks jutting from the dead earth. Dan Surel pointed to the rocks and the seven riders turned to the rocks. That is where they would meet the riders of Trex.

Broad daylight and their own cloud of dust afforded the dustriders no element of surprise. Dan Surel gestured to Kasavar and the twins; Denel and Havoted, and pointed them north west ahead of the jutting rock. Andar recognized the rock outcropping from his map as Ktzaad's Fang, named after a lost demon prince of a forgotten religion.

Kasavar and the twins rode hard and fast, making a wide circle around the small rock cliffs while Dan Surel, Vrenna, and Ca'Naan rode slower toward the eastern edge of the rocks.

Andar saw half of the twenty men ride south on the western edge of hte rocks. They dismounted and drew back short recurve bows of black ash. Andar saw the red sun shine on barbed steel arrowheads. Kasavar rode towards these ten armored soldiers but cut sharp to the east just out of arrowshot. Andar heard wooden shafts falling on the hard packed clay.

Dan Surel rode hard toward the eastern edge of the rocks as they saw Kasavar and the twins disappear in a wide arc behind the rock wall ahead of them. Andar looked to his left and saw the western archers in disarray, attempting to remount and chase Dan Surel and the others as they rode to the eastern edge of the rocks.

When Dan Surel's group crested the rock wall, Andar began to see the bandit lord's plan. The second group of pike and swordsmen had seen Kasavar and the twins ride past them at full gallop. With their attention on Kasavar's riders to the north east, they did not see Dan Surel, Ca'Naan, Vrenna, and Andar riding in to the south. Ten men had been outflanked by six.

"Ca'Naan, cut off their head!" Dan Surel drew his golden broadsword and held it high over his head, shining in the red sun. He and Vrenna rode in hard, swords high while Ca'Naan drew two spears from his pack with practiced ease.

Ca'Naan's spears were unlike any Andar had seen. They were three feet long and weighted at the rear and half way up the guard. Three long feathers kept the spear flying straight and the weights gave the spear speed and great force.

Andar never saw anyone throw like Ca'Naan in his life. Ca'Naan, at full gallop, had his second spear in the air before the first had hit his mark. The first spear soared through the air and hammered through the side of the lead rider's bronze breastplate. The helmeted and plumed leader fell into a black metal heap.

The second spear hit another of the riders, second in command from his position and the quality of his armor, in the throat. The spear fell to the ground but Andar clearly saw a wide spray of blood from the doomed man's throat. Another spear hit one of the remaining eight men before Vrenna and Dan Surel crashed into them like the point of an arrow.

Andar looked to the west and saw the dust cloud of Kasavar and the twins as they circled the eastern edge of the rock outcropping. They

would soon hit the rear of the ten archers just as the archers would approach Dan Surel's group from the rear. It was a risky ploy. Kasavar and the twins would have to ride nearly four times the distance of the archers but the three light bandits could ride much faster than ten armored archers.

Andar turned to see Vrenna duck under a sword swing and cleave into the attacker's side, cutting deep into his armor and leaving a trail of blood in the air. She spun her blade and cut off a spear tip before beheading its owner. Surel had cut down two men and had hewed the horse of another, sending the horse and rider into a bone splintering fall.

Andar heard a commotion from behind him and turned. The archers rode in, all ten of them. One in the front drew his black recurve bow and aimed horizontally at Andar's chest. Andar heard the sharp ring of metal on metal. The arrow soared wide over his head. The archer fell backward over his horse with the handle of an axe protruding form his pinned black cloak. Two more of the archers fell and the remaining seven turned as Kasavar and the twins rode in.

Kasavar drew another hand axe from a leather bag on his saddle while Denel fired his own bow into the crowd of archers. Havoted rode in from the side, crushing one archer's head with his one-handed spiked warhammer. Vrenna and Dan Surel roared past Andar into the archers but all fell before they had reached the skirmish.

It took less than eight minutes for Dan Surel and his five bandits to kill twenty armed and armored soldiers of the most feared army in the south deserts. Only Havoted had been wounded, a black arrowshaft protruding form his shoulder. His brother poked at the arrow when Havoted wasn't looking sending a girlish shriek from the large man. Denel hopped back giggling.

Dan Surel inspected the arrow and before Havoted could protest, the bandit lord pushed the barbed head through and broke off the shaft. Another yank and the arrow was through.

Ca'Naan gathered the horses that remained alive and put down those too wounded to travel.

"Gather their armor. We may need a ruse." Vrenna and Andar unbuckled the bronze and black leather armor from the corpses, tossing aside broken or severed pieces from those still serviceable. Havoted smiled at a ruby encrusted short sword he retrieved from the

dead captain and strapped it around his waist on a wide leather sword belt.

"These men were coming from the wrong direction," said Kasavar. "Gazu Kadem is far east of here."

"Scouts perhaps," said Dan Surel, saddling one of the Trex horses with his own well-worn saddle. "Or messengers. We may never know."

The Dustriders camped that night among the rocks. Three shifts of two kept watch throughout the night. Only young Ca'Naan slept through the night as reward for his marvelous throws in the battle.

They rode the next day through. By dusk they saw a dust cloud on the horizon that rose high into the air and spread wide across the lands ahead.. Andar's map clearly led to this spot. They had found the city of Xin Kala, but someone else had found it first.

They donned the armor of the Trex soldiers. It was bulky, hot, and uncomfortable. The armor was a mixture of bronze and thick boiled leather intended to protect the wearer's left side while leaving the right open and flexible. A bronze chestguard, and pauldron on the left shoulder guarded the wearer's shield side. Plates of bronze further protected the left arm. A coif of thick leather hung from the back and sides of the skullcap down the neck of the wearer, a boiled leather face guard protected the face, and a thick angled gorget protected the wearer's throat. A flexible skirt of banded leather and thin flexible bands of iron allowed the wearer to ride while protecting the groin and legs in battle. Leather breeches tucked into high riding boots studded with iron spurs.

Ca'Naan again rode ahead to scout and the rest slowed their ride until he returned an hour later.

"It's a canyon. A city under the ground dug up by slaves."

"Are there more soldiers?" asked Dan Surel.

"Yes, one hundred at least. There is a central barracks on the northern ridge of the canyon. They wear the same armor."

Dan Surel thought a moment. His eyes moved to Kasavar and then to Vrenna. "Let's see if our ruse works."

Andar tugged at the straps of his armor, unable to fit it comfortably. The armor was heavy and slowed the riders. Andar understood how

Kasavar and the twins were able to outrun the archers the previous day.

They crested teh canyon two hours later and the sight stunned all of them. The canyon was man made, an excavation of incredible scope. The excavation dug deep into the clay and rock of the land around it. Three structures had been uncovered. A huge zigggurat protruded from the north wall of the excavation. It stood nearly five hundred feet high. Fifty foot high steps traveled from the base of the ziggurat to the top. On the front surface, inset into the body of the temple was a carving of a nude woman on her knees, her arms extended out to her sides. One hand grasped sheafs of corn, the other held a pile of skulls. Full breasts and wide hips gave her a motherly figure. The blank expression on her face and within her smooth almond eyes spoke of authority and divinity. Her bare legs were open and betweeen her knees, at the base of the ziggurat, was a door fifty feet high and broken inward.

Another structure, a mound three hundred feet south of the ziggurat, lay uncovered as well. Four sets of steps rose to the top of the mound on all sides. Broken statues, eroded from thousands of years surrounded a smooth stone surface at the mound's base. In the center of the platform was a huge statue of a beast's head facing up into the sky with a huge gaping mouth laying wide open. The beast was eye-less and horrific, a beast never meant to walk this world.

On the western wall, the wall opposite the wall on which the Dustriders stood, revealed hundreds of carved stone dwellings embedded in limestone rock. Each was stacked on top of one another and stretched across the entire eastern wall of the dig. There were hundreds of them.

"Do you see the lines in the carved rock wall they dug through to get to these buildings?" Andar said. The others listened as they beheld the sight in front of them. "Each layer represents the desert seasonal changes of about two hundred and forty years. Every two hundred and forty years, the climate changes and the ground moistens for about thirty years before a ten-year sandstorm sucks the land dry and bakes it into rock. There are dozens of those layers in that rock wall."

"Thirty three." Ca'Naan's voice turned everyone's head. The boy smiled at them under his overlarge helmet.

"That makes these structures nearly ten thousand years old." Andar's voice quivered in awe and wonder. What he was saying could not be

true. "The oldest records of any civilization we know of is about forty eight hundred years ago with the first Kun empire of the south. This is twice that old.

The bandits looked at the huge ziggurat and the huge statue of the woman carved into its front face. That statue had guarded this city for ten millenia. They looked at the gaping maw of the eyeless beast on the peak of the ceremonial mound. Though the sun beat down with fierce red fire, Andar felt a chill run over his skin. From their look, the others felt the same chill.

As humbling as the site of the ancient temple had been, those who had uncovered it humbled the Dustriders even further. Tne dig had opened up a nearly half a league long, a quarter league across, and another quarter league deep. The very top of the ziggurat must have been exposed in the most recent sandstorms, alerting the lucky few who traveled past to discover it. The amount of effort for such a dig was beyond imagination but Andar did not need to imagine it. It was right in front of him.

A thousand slaves crawled over nearly every surface of the dig. They hauled baskets of rock on bent and twisted backs to a great mound growing on the western edge of the dig. A network of platforms, ramps, scaffolds, ropes, and pullies built a system of vast scale for digging and moving rock.

The slaves, dark skinned and thin from generations of hard labor, each performed their small task in a huge system. Andar marveled at their work as a single organism, a single machine able to dig through tons of rock and uncover this ancient marvel.

As his eyes moved over the lines of slaves he saw one fall, a young man. His thin malnourished body collapsed under the weight of his burdon. Andar could clearly see that the man's leg and broken and twisted at a horrible angle. The man didn't scream even as he looked at the bone jutting from his own thigh. He didn't scream when the bronze-armored slavemaster began to whip him, drawing open gashes on the man's back. He didn't so much as cry out when the slavemaster saw the broken leg, drew a long curved dagger from his belt, and opened the man's throat. As he saw his own blood gush from his throat, the man's expression never changed from one of hopeless misery. Andar swallowed back his nausia.

The Dustriders rode their mounts down a hand carved ramp that led to the floor of the dig. Slaves turned away and pressed to the rock

wall as they passed, fearful of those armored as the knights of Trex. Andar saw Dan Surel's eyes moving over the entire scene of the dig, marking pockets of guards. He turned his horse to a pair of guards leaning heavily ont eh side of a tall wooden cart full of crushed rock. They did not see the horse approach behind them. Dan Surel cleared his throat loudly and shouted to the two men in a deep authoritative voice.

"I am commander Surax of Gazu Kadem." The two men spun around and crossed their arms over their chest in salute. "Dan Trex seeks word of the progress here."

The two men looked at each other. The smaller one spoke first.

"You will probably want to talk to our Swordguard. He knows far more than we, my lord."

"I asked you the question. What news?"

The two guards looked again at each other. The larger one shrugged and the smaller one began to speak again.

"We found three vaults in the temple's halls behind sealed stone doors. We found a sealed pot in the vaults containing vellum sheaves bound in leather. Commander Otano believes the amulet is in the pits below the alter." The man nodded to the hill with the demon-head alter on its crest. He looked back to the taller guard who shrugged again and cleared his throat. "The men are having dreams. Dark dreams. They see this place the way it was. They see unspeakable acts of sorcery and witchcraft, the sacrifice of babes and children and the summoning of demons from the seven hells. They see her." The man nodded to the huge statue on the front of the ziggurat. Andar looked to the smooth lifeless eyes of the god-queen statue. His skin crawled.

"You there!" A booming voice came from behind the Dustriders. Andar turned with the others. He saw Havoted's hand fall to the jeweled sword on his belt.

AN older man in the same bronze and leather armor of Dan Trex's men approached with two others. He carried his plumed helm under his arm. His gray streaked hair hung back in a greasy ponytail bound in a leather tie. A silver-hilted sword hung on his belt.

"We expected you a day ago. What news from the command? Which one of you leads your party?" The man's eyes narrowed. "Weren't there supposed to be more of you?"

Andar saw Dan Surel's hand fall to his own hilt. Kasavar used his bootheel to kick his hammer handle close to his hand. Andar looked around and saw twenty other soldiers within earshot. The odds were not good in this fight.

Vrenna dismounted and strode towards the commander, taking off her mask and helm as she did so. The old guard's eyes went wide. He was a head taller than the woman but the ease of her steps made him visibly nervous. Andar knew how the man felt.

When she was right in front of him, Vrenna gripped the front of his coif and pulled his head down. She whispered to him, her red lips just a hair away from the man's ear. As she whispered, the man's eyes went wide and his face went pale. When she finished, she let go of the man and walked back to her horse.

"I am sorry." The old man stammered. He waved the two other guards away. Andar had no idea what Vrenna had said but the results were stunning. Dan Surel did not know either but he knew how to capitalize on the shift in power.

"We seek the leatherbound book from the temple's vaults. Bring it to us tonight." Dan Surel looked around. "We will be camped there." He pointed to a corner of the carved out canyon.

"Yes, sir."

The gray haired captain returned to the Dustrider's camp two hours later. He held out a cloth-wrapped bundle tied with twine to Dan Surel but his eyes continued to dart to Vrenna and then dart quickly away. Dan Surel handed the bundle to Andar without taking his own eyes from the captain.

"Leave us."

The captain crossed his gauntledted arms across his chest and quickly left.

Andar's hands shook. The cloth wrapping was new, but the object within might be ten thousand years old, the oldest known man made object he had ever seen. He untied the bundle and looked in awe at the leather cracked cover it revealed. A tie of braided leather cords wrapped three times around folded cover. Andar carefully took the cloth pouch off and turned the tied book in his hands. For something so old, it was remarkably preserved. He had seen books of five to six hundred years in far worse condition than this. Perhaps it was a ruse.

Andar didn't know that this book came from within the vaults. Someone could have easily slipped it in.

"Seven hells, open it old man!" Havoted's voice shook Andar out of his musings. Havoted had removed his sleeve and Denel changed the dressing on his wound. Denel examined the ugly black marks that protruded around the wound in Havoted's arm.

Andar shrugged and unwrapped the tie. The book opened like an envelope revealing six sheaves of folded paper bound to the leather cover with threads of leather. The vellum pages had a jagged cut on the edges but like the rest of the book, looked remarkably preserved.

"Gods below, he's never going to finish with that thing. I'll go scout the camp." Havoted pulled on the Trexian breastplate. He and Denel left the others and headed into the camp.

Andar carefully thumbed through the book, reading passages of text and examining diagrams. Most of the words were completely foreign to him, a strange language of incredibly intricate lettering. The diagrams were horrifying.

Detailed images revealed rites and rituals of dissection, torture, and mutiliation. Diagrams of biological accuracy outlined twisted creatures of the darkest nightmares. Glyphs and symbols of impossible complexity had been inked with iron and plant pigments.

"I have seen books like this before." Andar told the others. Dan Surel turned to listen, the others followed his example. "Once or twice we recovered texts like this one from expeditions into ancient Voth burial grounds in the western mountains. We couldn't translate much of them but we filed them under the insane ramblings of witches worshipping the dark bestial gods of the Voth. I've never seen one this old."

Andar turned to the final pages of the book. He skipped over the darkest and bloodiest images, images of the torture and sacrifice of children, to a diagram of a jar baked in clay and sealed with a strange gas syphened from deep caves.

"I think I see how they preserved this. They sealed it in a pot with a strange air. It must have helped preserve these pages under the earth for one hundred centuries. It's remarkable."

Andar turned back to the first pages and began looking over it again. In what seemed like moments, he realized darkness had fallen and the

twins returned to their camp.

"Their commander resides in the temple. He has broken into every vault and horded what he has found of value. No one has found the amulet. They think it is in the pit under the alter. He sent teams of slaves and even some of his troops into the pit but no one has come back. They think it's trapped." Havoted paused for a moment, weighing his words. "We've been lucky so far, but I don't think we can get into the temple."

Dan Surel scratched his chin and thought for a few moments. No one spoke until he broke the silence himself.

"So we can go into the pit or we leave tonight without the amulet." Dan Surel thought another moment. "Let us sleep on it and decide in the morning. Ca'Naan. You're on first watch. Wake the twins in two hours."

The dream engulfed like a thick black cloak. He found himself back in the halls of the Tower of the Eye, nearly two thousand miles north and nearly a year back in time. An alcohol fueled arguement with a colleague, a ninth-circle agent of the Eye named Jamus, had the man leading Andar down a twisted set of stairs Andar had never before seen. The agent of the Eye, a lower-order telepath dressed in black leather boots and a black cloak clasped with a silver eye, dragged Andar through a twisted set of halls Andar had never seen. They traveled down halls deep under the ground level of the tower, past narrow-eyed onlookers. His guide unlocked huge ironbound doors and led them by lanternlight further into the depths.

How did a theological debate lead him here? Where was he being taken? Andar had taken the position that the old religions of the Voth were designed by kings to keep control over their people. He had worried that his words might be considerd blasphemous to the worshippers of Suun, the goddess of the Faigon empire, but those of the Eye seemed to care little for any religious order. The telepathic agents of the Eye saw deep into the hearts of man, that was their religion.

Speaking of the demons of the Voth religions as folklore, however, seemed to upset his drunken friend. It led them both down into the depths of the tower, to one last huge iron-bound door of thick oak. His guide looked at him through angry bloodshot eyes. Was he going to show him some artifact? Perhaps a horned skull or a book of ritual? Andar had seen such things before, constructs of the twisted Voth

witches used to scare their followers into fanatical loyalty.

When his guide swung open the door, Andar cried out in shock. He could never have imagined what his eyes would fall upon. He had no idea how this night would change his life forever, sending him south this very night on horseback and never stopping until he fell into the clutches of the Dustriders.

Nothing would ever shake the image from his head. He would forever remember exactly what the steel-banded dcell door would sound like when it opened. He would remember the look of victory in Jamus's eyes. He would remember the smell of rotten meat and spoiled milk.

He would remember the figure strapped and chained to the wooden cross, four arms and two twisted legs ending in wide clawed hooves. The creature was tall and covered in black oily skin. A strange alien bone structure protruded from its atrophed body. Emaciated muscles and tendons held together a twisted bone structure. Andar's mind wanted to violently reject it. He wanted to vomit the image from his mind as he felt his meal nearly spill out from his stomach. He wanted to run and scream. He wanted to burn the creature's body in the hottest fire and rid the lands of its abominable form.

A leather mask covered the ghastly creature's eyes and head. A thick leather strap gagged the creature's mouth. Andar could make out tiny sharp teeth biting into the leather gag. He felt grateful to the mask that shielded him from the creature's eyes. Andar was quite sure he would go raving mad if he ever saw them. The creature's head tilted up, somehow sensing Ander and Jamus. Andar heard the creature cough through the gag, a weak and pathetic sound. Andar's revulsion turned into deep hopelessness. He saw the rust on the chains and the pieces of the cross that had worn away as the creature hung in this cellar. How long had they kept it here like that? Twenty years? Fifty? How many knew of this hideous secret? Why was it here?

Jamus turned to Andar with a smile on his lips.

"Demon's exist."

Andar awoke with a cry. Cold sweat hung on his forhead and the taste of spoiled milk sat heavy in his throat. The other Dustriders looked over at him. Havoted's armor was off agan and Denel was wiping off the wound on his brother's shoulder. It had grown red and swollen over the night. Black veins spidered out across his shoulder and into his chest. Denel looked concerned. Havoted looked bad.

Kasavar continued with a story he had apparently been telling before Andar awoke. Andar did not appear to be the only one to dream this night. From the look of them, all of the Dustriders had tasted their own dreams of darkness.

"I was about six when my family moved south into the villages of the borderlands to avoid the coming war." Kasavar looked out over the camp as he spoke. It was hard to ever imagine the tattooed hulk as a small child. "Our caravan, about six familes, camped for the night off of the road that split the dustlands. My brother and I went exploring. We went further than we had intended. There was a stone house, burned and rebuilt a dozen times from the look of it. Farmers, no doubt, lived there for hundreds of years and dozens of wars. There was a small burial ground behind it with markers from a dozen different gods.

"We went into the house but it had been plundered a hundred times before us. Still, Thernan, my brother, didn't want to leave empty handed. He found a knot of wood that pulled out a section of the floor to a hidden cellar. Dust danced like ghosts in the sunlight streaming in from the broken roof.

"There was a sick oder in the air, one I hadn't ever smelled before. It made our lungs close off and required our direct force of will to breathe. Something wasn't right in that place and both my brother and I knew it. But Thernan went in anyway. He kept talking about gold and jewels. He climbed down into the cellar and I found myself going down with him.

"The cellar was empty except for rotten firewood and dead grains. He found a loose wall of stacked rock and began to dig, still rambling on about gold and jewels. He pulled out a support rock and the wall collapsed in revealing an opening about as tall as a man's shoulders."

Kasavar stopped, he took a deep breath and continued.

"What we saw in there no man was ever meant to see. We just stared at it and it stared back at us with dead eyes. It looked like a man burned black and smoothed over with mud. It didn't have a nose or ears, just eyes and a mouth. Someone had bound it in chains and burned it in hundreds of places with brands of old holy symbols. It looked like it had been there forever, buried under the rock. Tharnan began to say something but as soon as his voice touched the air, the thing's trance ended.

"It thrashed against its bonds, wiggling like an eel. It opened its mouth and howled in a voice beyond any I had ever heard. I thought I would go mad hearing it. It's head thrashed in a blur of motion, faster than my eyes could see.

"We ran. We ran so fast that our muscles ached for days. We didn't sleep for a week but eventually we pushed the memories of that place, that thing, out of our minds.

"My brother killed himself two years later. He jumped into a rock ravine when he was with our father on a hunt. No one knew why he would do such a thing and I had completely forgotten about the demon in the cellar. I forgot until last night."

Silence hung over the Dustriders. They looked to one another and Dan Sural watched them all.

"We can leave now, this morning. We can be back in Tog Veel in a week. Each of you holds enough coin to live as kings for the rest of your lives. Nothing holds us here. To the seven hells with the amulet." Dan Surel let the words linger in their minds.

"I didn't join this band to grow fat and die in the arms of a whore." Denel smiled. Hasavar agreed. "I never did this for money. We're here because this is what we do. I say we look at where this ends."

Kasavar looked to Dan Surel and nodded.

"I'm in," said Ca'Naan. Dan Surel turned to Vrenna. The slightest smile crossed her red lips. Dan Surel smiled back.

Andar tried to make a silent prayer and realized he had no gods left.

The Dustriders climbed the broken steps to the alter at the top of the mound an hour later. Any guards left them a wide path and any slaves were too preoccupied with their own suffering to care. As they walked, Dan Surel took Andar to the side.

"You are as much one of the Dustriders as any of us, but no one will think less of you if you wish to leave. You have made us all a lot of money. To think we were tossing tarnished jewelry into the desert before you told us how much those trinkets were worth.

"We do not know what is down there. We're here because such places draw us like ants to syrup. We live for such unknowns. But you are an appraiser, a historian. Your place is behind an bazaar table stealing

gold from rich lords. We do not ask you to come with us."

Andar looked at Dan Surel and at the backs of the other bandit lords approaching the alter. Andar saw Vrenna turn and look at him with those burning sky blue eyes. She smiled at him from under her bronze and leather helm.

"I will go."

The demon head statue sat in the center of a platform of raised rock. Its eyeless face stared up into the sky, tusked mouth agape. The wide open mouth led to a a deep shaft. Kasavar tied a thick knotted rope around one of the tusks of the demon head, throwing the rest of it down into the shaft. The rope was fifty knots and from the sound of the bronze endcap, it just touched the ground below.

Andar recalled the images of the leather-wrapped tome.

"Sacrifices for the witch-queen were cut open and dropped down into the shaft. They dropped in at least one a week for four years, mostly children. Plague struck the village around her and she responded by throwing in every child under the age of four in the village. Her people revolted. They broke into her bedchamber and threw her down into the pit below. She was the last sacrifice they made. The rest of the village either left or died of the plague."

The Dustriders stared into the pit as Andar told his tale. When he finished, silence sat thick around them. Finally Kasavar drew a long dagger from his boot, held it in his teeth, and climbed down the rope into the pit below. The other Dustriders, Andar included, followed.

Darkness overtook them. A pillar of sunlight cut through the dust like a beam of heaven into a black hell.

Two body-lengths down the rope the pit opened up wide into a cavern. Droplets of water echoed off of the far walls. They slid down the rope, Havoted favoring his left arm. Andar made use of the thick knots in the rope. The rough days he had spent in the company of the bandit lords had strengthened his arms and legs more than he realized, however. A year before he would have fallen to his death in just his attempt to hold on to such a rope.

Kasavar reached the bottom. The ground crunched under his feet. Soon they all stood next to the tall man Denel struck flint to steel and his torch burned bright. They all looked silently at the bones on which they stood. Little bones cracked under tehir feet and little skulls

looked at them with empty black eyes. No one spoke.

Slowly, mindful of the bones of hundreds of children, Kasavar stepped further into the cavern. They passed piles of bones of those who had died in the fall and to a clearing on the rock floor. They circled a huge natural pillar of stone stretching from the floor to the high ceiling of the cavern. Strange carvings adorned the pillar's surface.

They found a clearing on the other side where a deep trench cut a circle into he floor. More bones, dismemberedand scattered, filled the trench. A circle of two hundred skulls faced inward into the circle. Kasavar knelt and brushed away ten thousand years of dust to reveal swirling runes and sigils carved into the stone floor.

"What are they, Andar?" asked Dan Surel. The whisper of his voice ecoed across the wide underground cavern. Andar knelt and examined the swirling symbols.

"I do not know." Andar took the ancient book from a pack at his waist. "They are inked into the book as well but I couldn't guess at their meaning. Something horrible happened here, some sort of ceremony to the dark beasts these people worshipped.?

The bandit lords stood in silence, looking at the looming shadows around them.

"Look!" Ca'Naan's voice echoed across the darkness. The young man pointed to their left where glimmers of gold reflected the sunlight of the opening above. They approached the glimmer and saw the crumpled form of a skeleton in tattered rotten silk adorned with gold bracelets, rings, anklets, and even a full set of gold teeth. The amulet hung around her neck. A circle of gold etched in intricate patterns held a deep blue gem in the center. Even after an eternity under the earth, the gold shone bright. Andar looked to the skull bent back over her shoulders. They had found the witch-queen.

Both of her legs were broken and twisted. Andar wondered how she had crawled so far from the pit where her people had thrown her. Her skull stared at the cavern's ceiling, her mouth open wide. Dan Surel reached out and yanked the amulet from her neck. The body fell to dust and splinters of decayed bone leaving the amulet in his open hand.

"Let us leave."

Fear exploded in Andar's chest. White figures, small and thin,

appeared all around them. They floated out of the darkness on cold winds. Their thin featureless bodies shone bright in the darkness. They stared at the Dustriders with wide black eyes. Cold shivvers ran across Andar and his knees grew weak. They were all struck speechless.

That was when Andar felt the vibration.

The apprations around them stole all attention until a deep bone rattling reverberation shook the walls and sent waves of numbness through Andar. The white figures faded away into wisps of dust motes as the vibration grew.

Something huge moved in the shadows. They all heard the cracks of centuries of sand, clay, and packed dust breaking free. The torchlight barely reached into the depths of the cavern where a black mass shifted and moved. It came towards them, an unimaginable shaped hulk. A mouth opened wide, nearly three feet from top to bottom covered with a bramble of splintered tusks and sharp teeth. The vibration pulsed as the creature grew closer.

"Dan Surel."

Havoted's calm voice broke Andar's paralysis. He saw the calm face of Havoted and saw the man draw his spiked hammer from his belt. Andar saw the heavy black shape moving in.

"Take them and leave."

Dan Surel began to protest but his words fell useless into the darkness. Havoted and Denel looked at eachother for a single moment. Understanding and sadness filled Denel's eyes. Denel turned to the rest of the Dustriders.

"We must go."

No further argument occurred. The Dustriders ran back to the rope. Andar looked a final time at Havoted standing tall and proud, his spiked hammer held high as a great mass moved in on him in the shadows. He saw the hammer come down and the vibrations quickened in his bones. Then he was up the rope, pushed by adrenaline until he burst into sunlight and onto the rock platform of the ancient alter. Andar's love of the light above faded quickly as he realized their new situation.

All around them, a circle of Trexian warriors stood ready, gripping sword hilts and wooden bucklers. Andar looked around. Over fifty

guards stood on or around the platform. At the foot of the steps of the temple, a quarter league away, stood a large man in full bronze armor and draped in a black cloak. He held an ornate bronze helmet in his hands. Andar had little doubt that he looked upon the lord of this excavation.

"Vrenna, Kasavar. Give us a path. Vrenna slowly drew her black scorpion-hilted saber while a pair of axes found their way into Kasavar's caloused hands. "Ca'Naan. Cut off their head."

Vrenna and Kasavar exploded into the line of men on the north face of the platform. Dan Surel and Denel drew their blades and held off the guards on their flanks. Ca'Naan drew one of his weighted short spears from his back.

Vrenna cut low into the hamstrings of two men as Kasavar brought his axes under the shields of two more. In seconds they had cleared a path twenty feet from the pit's open mouth.

Ca'Naan ran forward, his spear high and pointed at the temple. Red sunlight streamed behind him. He threw hard, sreaming out every ounce of energy he had in the throw. His cry echoed off of the stone walls of the excavation scaring every man into a defensive crouch.

The spear flew straight from the light of the red sun. In the glare, the Trexian lord never saw it coming. The spear tip smashed through the commander's bronze breastplate, piercing his heart and punching a hole out the back of his armor. Blood sprayed from both the front and back of the man. A cry came from the temple as the commander's men saw what happened. Soldiers looked unnerved and uneasy around them. Six more soldiers fell to their blades before the pit began to fall in.

Andar recalled later hearing a crack in the depths under their feet as though the spine of the world had shattered. The great bulk of the beast under the earth had smashed against the cavern's only support, a huge pillar of stone just north of the pit. As it gave way, so did the ground above.

"Run!" Dan Surel shouted. The other Dustriders burst into a dead run. They ran over the tumbling bodies of Trexian soldiers and panicked slaves. Andar felt Dan Surel yank him into a fast run. Andar saw Denel hesitate before running himself as the black maw of the pit fell away and the hill collapsed inward.

The delay cost him. One of the guards slashed the back of Denel's knee

as he ran. He stumbled but Kasavar picked him up over one shoulder and continued to run, planting one axe in the face of a guard with too much verve. Dan Surel and Vrenna cut a path through the panic and chaos around them until they broke to the path leading up the side of the excavation. In moments they were at the edge of the excavation's wall staring down as the floor fell into the black cavern below.

Dan Surel stabbed a confused guard in the stomach and took the reins of four horses the man once held. They rode hard for an hour on the four horses, Vrenna and Ca'Naan sharing brown mare with a white chest. Kasavar carried a wounded Denel over the front of his white steed. Andar and Dan Surel each had their own black stallion.

As the red sun set behind them, the Dustriders looked at the pillar of dust and smoke that stretched into the sky. Andar shivvered, imagining the horror in the collapsed pits under that cloud.

"I think I know why we had the dreams." Andar said, discovering his thoughts as they left his mouth. "The demon was calling out to its own. It called out and the closest thing to a brother it had were the memories in our minds. It called out through us, through our lives. Through time." The Dustriders continued to look at the dust pillar rising high into the air. Andar looked over to Vrenna, her eyes blazing in the setting red sun. What had she dreamed?

Denel never rode with he Dustriders again. He returned with them to Tog Veel, the tendons on his leg severed through. He walked with a stiff leg for the rest of his life. Andar heard rumors, years later, that the bandit lord had settled down with a plump woman on a large estate to the east farming wheat and grapes for wine.

Dan Surel led the Dustriders for two more years and many more adventures before taking his crown and settling down in a tower far from the corruption of Tog Veel.

As predicted, Ca'Naan took the Dustriders and rebuilt it into the desert raiders it had always been. Many a corrupt noble was separated from his wealth and one tenth of the take always found its way to Dan Surel's coffers.

Kasavar rode with Ca'Naan for ten years, well into his fiftieth decade of life until the tip of a crossbow bolt found its way into his liver and took his life.

Dan Surel built a library for Andar but Andar found himself on the road with the Dustriders more than in a wide chair with a yellowed

leatherbound tome. He grew used to the road and the road grew used to him.

Vrenna left them the night they had fled the ruined excavation. At their camp, Andar awoke to see Dan Surel and Vrenna standing in the moonlight. Dan Surel bent down and kissed the woman and as the bandit lord returned to the camp, Vrenna disappeared into the darkness.

Dan Surel sat at the smouldering campfire. He turned the amulet over in his hands, watching firelight dance over the deep blue gem. He saw Andar's open eyes.

"How much do you suppose it is worth?" the bandit lord asked Andar.

"It is priceless. There is no older artifact known to man."

"I bet the swindlers of Tog Veel could find a price." Dan Surel's eyes went back to the blue gemstone. "I think I will keep this one."

Author's Notes: I had a hard time with the story in Bandit Lords. I liked the characters and I liked a lot of the scenes, but it seemed like a whole lot of words to say "bandits go to an old city and fight a demonic hippo". It is also the Vrenna story where Vrenna plays the smallest part. I plan on making her more of a central figure from now on and I'll probably drop the idea that everything is outside her point-of-view. You'll see this change in "Vrenna and the White".

The Deep One

Gelak Bluewillow ran a hand down the gray stubble of his sunburned cheeks. By the time he would return to the shore the beard would be full. Gelak gazed over the blue water, deep and endless. The water drew a sharp line against the orange sky of the huge red sun's set. Dark clouds rose in the north. It may be a rough night.

Gelak looked over the four lines cabled to the four corners of his twenty foot boat. None of the four had moved in three days. In his two weeks on the deep waters, only four fish had bitten. Two were less than forty pounds and the two larger ones looked sick. That seemed to be the way of it these days. Gelak had to go further and further out each season. Any further and the current might pull him so far out to sea that he could never pull wind enough to return. Gelak's boat wasn't big enough for waters that deep. His boat was too small and Gelak was too old.

At sixty four, Gelak should be home now. His sons should be wrestling with the deep seas while he stayed at home and wrestled with his wife. War with the Northerners stole all three of his sons. They died with axes in their hands, paintings of Onefang the Hunter on their chest, and lead musket balls tearing through their skin.

So Gelak rode the seas instead of his sons. The war had taken his sons but not his wife and not his two daughters. The crops they tried to harvest would not grow so Gelak's fish were the only food they ate. Half of that went to the three-cornered-hat-wearing fat Northerner who now led their town of Anglehoof. But the fish didn't bite like they used to.

Gelak pulled hard on the ropes of the small vessel's sail. The wind blew in gusts and the rope bit into Gelak's blistered hand. The storm grew on the horizon, bigger than he expected. The sky darkened and yellow cracks of lightning broke through the clouds and to the surface of the ocean.

One of the lines went taut and the boat lurched. Gelak's watery brown eyes sharpened. A cold drizzle glazed the boat and the old man within it. He felt the boat dip towards the tight line. It was a big one, maybe one hundred pounds.

Gelak pulled on a thick pair of leather gloves, oiled and sun baked. He wrapped a wide leather belt around his waist and tied it with four leather ties. A thick rope tied his belt to the center beam of the boat's hull.

Gelak pulled the line even tighter and with his feet planted, he pulled it over a peg on the horizontal wooden crank. Rain now fell in gusts and lightning cracked even closer. Gelak pushed aside his gray hair and squinted his eyes against the torrent of rain. He turned the crank and felt the boat lurch again. Something gave under the water. The line shifted to the bow. Gelak turned the crank in two rotations. His boat swayed in the wind and under the weight of the line. He heard wood creak and then crack. Thunder rumbled deep in the wood of the boat and in the bones of the old man.

A dorsal fin broke the water. It wasn't a fish, it was a shark. It was ten feet from tail to nose, the shark yanked hard and the boat lurched again. Rain fell hard over Gelak. He drew a long sharp knife from a sheath at his side. He should cut the line. Bringing in a shark was nearly impossible in fair weather. Trying to bring in one this big in a storm like this was madness. Gelak seemed to have madness in him

this night. He slipped the knife back into the sheath and gripped the wheel with both gloved hands.

The boat shifted in a quarter circle against the current. The wood boat groaned like an old man. Gelak turned the wheel again and heard the thrashing of water off the side of the boat. Gelak rushed to the side, pulling a barbed harpoon from under the boat's railing. He could see the large shark twisting and pulling but Gelak couldn't reach it. In a fluid motion, Gelak drew the knife at his belt and cut the rope attaching him to the boat's hull. It was a dangerous and foolish choice.

The groaning wood snapped. The side of the boat exploded into splinters. Gelak fell into the water and his boat went end up in the sea. Gelak's harpoon fell from his grip into the depths of the sea but his knife, the knife of his father, stayed in his grip.

The shark was on him. He could feel the razor-sharp teeth snapping at his arms. Gelak stabbed twice. Red blood flowed into the water in a cloud. The line of teeth cut across his thigh and he screamed as the would filled with seawater. He twisted and pulled his leg out of reach, stabbing again. The stab pierced one of the sharks black eyes and the eye burst. He pushed the long blade deeper. The huge shark thrashed one last time but then went limp.

Lightning flashed in a series of bolts. Thunder rolled across the sea. Gelak saw six more dorsal fins cutting across the water, approaching the cloud of blood left by their clanmate. Gelak breathed hard and gripped his knife. So this is how his life would end.

Lightning smashed again. The fins were gone. The sharks were gone. Rain fell in sheets against the waters. Gelak scrambled and found a long wooden plank, all that remained of his fifty year old boat. He had built it with his father and cleaned it with his sons. Now only this board remained.

The water rose around him. Gelak felt waves take hold of him and drag him deeper into the sea. Something huge moved below the surface. Gelak kicked his feet and turned into the waves.

A mountain broke the surface and rose into the black sky. It looked as if the earth below rose into the heavens. A huge displacement of the sea lifted Gelak hundreds of feet into the air. Crustations and collections of barnacles grew on the surface for what looked like thousands of years. The mountain was the color of slate, smooth and slick. A huge sphere lay embedded in the surface of the mountain. The

sphere rose above him. It rolled towards Gelak. It was an eye dozens of feet in diameter. This was no mountain.

"The Deep One."

Gelak's voice was a whisper in the crashing of the storm and the rolling of the waves but in his mind it roared. All thoughts of survival fled from the old man. He didn't feel the pain of the salt water in his wounded leg. He could only stare in awe at the enormous creature in front. It towered eighty feet above the water and the Gods knew how far below it. It stretched in both directions for as far as Gelak could see in the storm.

Gelak heard a deep rumble within the huge creature. A roar sent a geyser of water into the air, enough water to fill a lake. It took a long time for the water to rain down all around Gelak, dwarfing the rain around it. Gelak smiled as the seawater flowed over him.

In his sixty four years, Gelak had never imagined seeing anything like this. The shaman and skyreaders always spoke of the Grandfathers, the Gods that made their home among men. Gelak himself had prayed to the Deep One before each voyage onto the sea. He had prayed before this one. Since the death of his sons, however, Gelak had lost his faith and simply went through the motions as a creature of habit.

Now his faith had found him.

The huge eye beheld the old fisherman for a long time. Gelak saw ancient coral thousands of years old around the beast's eye. He saw lines of age as old as the rivers of the land on the massive creature's thick skin. Cris crossing scars showed centuries of battle against foes within the deep that Gelak had no wish to even imagine.

Gelak heard the rumble again and the Deep One spoke to him. Images flashed through the old man's mind in a flood. He saw volcanoes explode and pour molten rock into the depths of the ocean. Geysers of superheated steam hissed thousands of feet into the air. Gelak saw the continents crash together like sheets of clay sending mountains roaring into the sky and breaking open deep cracks into the earth below. Gelak saw sheets of ice ten thousand years old wash over the lands and recede back like waves on a beach.

Gelak saw a black drop of blood from another world fall into the lush fields of the south. A desert of dead white sand spread from the drop like an infected wound, swallowing the tropical lands in a sea of dust and decay. He saw the birth and death of kings like drops of rain

falling onto the earth. Forty thousand years of history flew through Gelak's mind in the blink of an eye.

The flood of images stopped and Gelak gasped for breath. The great eye of the Deep One held its stare on the tiny fisherman. In another roaring wave over one hundred feet high, the Deep One, a creature of perhaps one million years old, sank back into the sea. The beast's tail broke the surface and blacked out the sky. Gelak watched the two hundred foot wide blade crash down on the surface of the water like the fall of a world.

Gelak knew no more.

White light and the distant sound of voices woke Gelak. Far off, Gelak heard his wife screaming his name. He opened his eyes and shaded them from the harsh sun. Three of his fellow tribesman, old men like himself, helped him up. He was on a beach a quarter mile from their small village. He saw the amazed looks on the faces of his three friends. He saw his wife running towards him. She stopped. She looked down and behind Gelak. He followed her eyes.

Three sharks, brown and striped, sat still on the beach next to him. The smallest was eight feet long, the largest twelve. Gelak's ivory-hilted dagger still protruded from the black eye of the middle one. Gelak smiled. They would eat well tonight.

With his arm around his wife's slender waist, Gelak gave thanks to the Deep One, Grandfather of the Sea.

Author's Notes: This is another short story written in my lap in a boring meeting. There are three theologies for Faigon: the three heavens and seven hells of the Old Empire with all of their demon princes and cyclopean old gods, the beastial gods of Voth (including the Deep One), and Suun, the goddess of the new Empires of the North which is closer to 15th century Catholicism. This story is a bit of folklore for the Voth and their beastial gods.

Vrenna and the White

"I have never seen so beautiful a murderer before," said the fat man laying on a divan of silk and thick fur. Vrenna kept her eyes on him, unmoving. A half naked serving girl lowered a gold plate to the man's reach. He grabbed a plum and bit into it greedily, slapping the girl on the rump with his other hand as the juice ran down his chin. Vrenna's gaze didn't move. Another round slave girl dabbed at the juice on his chin with a white cloth.

From the corner of her eye, Vrenna saw the clenched teeth and tight muscles of the prince's guards. They were huge and dark skinned. They wore the bronze and black leather armor of the slave troops of Gazu Kadem. The prince or his father must have purchased them from Dan Trex, the general of the largest and most brutal slave army in the southern deserts. The cost must have been very high.

The guards gripped the hardwood shafts of their polearms tight. They hated Vrenna. She didn't care. She was not here to make friends.

"This witch queen causes my father great grief. Her hoard of fanatics grows larger by the day. She is a threat to all the lands around her and soon she will be a threat to us.

"War is costly. You are not as costly. We will pay what you want.

"Go to Vul Teven, the Temple of the Mother, and kill the heretic witch who calls herself the White."

The prince of Gazu Zvaar flittered his hand and a man in royal embroidered silk brought Vrenna a small leather bag. It chimed when she took it, the sound of jewels colliding. The bag disappeared under Vrenna's robes.

Vrenna did not bow when she left the prince's addressing hall. She could feel the frown on his face as she walked out under the red sun of the southern desert.

Vrenna drew up her hood as she stepped down the three hundred steps leading from the prince's ancient hall to the street below. Her left hand rested on the scorpion-carved hilt of her saber hidden under her black cloak. She felt the eyes of thirty guards follow her as she walked away into the streets of Gazu Zvaar, the City of Angels.

The red sun began to set, turning the yellow sky a deep orange. Vrenna had finished preparing and gathering her supplies. As she headed out to the city gates, she found the prince's robed adviser waiting for her.

"A moment of your time, Sai Kadem." Vrenna raised an eyebrow at the title. Few knew of the ancient term and fewer knew to tie the term to Vrenna. "I know what you think of the prince. He is a hard man to admire or respect. This order came from his father. Do not let the prince's words, mannerisms, or appearance fool you. The witch is extremely dangerous. Her power is real and we do not know what she will do with it. If even half the stories we hear are true, we all have

much to fear.

"I will leave you now, Sai Kadem. May the old gods watch you."

The adviser's last sentence lent more credence to his words than anything else in his story. To be caught speaking of the old gods in this city meant death by burning. The desert kings ruled their cities and nothing stood above them.

Vrenna left the high walls of Gazu Zvaar and its ancient towering palaces behind her. For two days she headed south through the mudplains. Sharp rock of buried mountains pierced through cracked clay under her horse's hooves. The sky was clear to the north, east, and west. To the south, the sky was thick and deep red. In half a day she would face Karakz's Wall.

The red sandstorm raged from the days men worshipped the old gods, over two thousand years and perhaps much longer. Named after the demon lord of the fourth hell in the old texts, Karakz's Wall stretched four hundred leagues across and fifty leagues deep. It split the eastern deserts in two and did more to protect Gazu Zfaar from the south as any army or man made wall.

Hundreds died in the tearing sands of the wall every year. Gusts and shifting winds turned the most steadfast travelers in circles as the air sucked every droplet of life from their skin. The red sands darkened the sky. All sense of direction became lost inside the storm.

Vrenna did not worry. She had a magic to guide her. Keeping the sands from ripping the skin off of her bones was a greater worry. Vrenna undressed and laid out the clothes that would save her life. She pulled on a pair of leather breeches and tucked them into a pair of high leather boots. She replaced her open-stomached chestguard with a full leather tunic, tight and bound with strong cords. Long sleeves tucked into the tops of worn leather gloves. Vrenna replaced her cloth cloak and hood with one of animal hide. She covered her nose and mouth with a mask of thick cloth and pulled her hood low over her face. For the next three days she would be nearly blind in the storm. The nights would be worse.

Vrenna traveled across the storm as a tiny black speck in an angry sea of roaring sand. The sand ripped at her leather clothes and whipped her cloak around her. It stung what little skin she had exposed and blinded her any time she opened her eyes. She felt it stealing the air in her lungs and the water that flowed in her body. She ate and drank

when she could, which was very infrequent. On occasion she saw funnels in the clouds of sand and knew if one found her, she would die quickly. She huddled in the black of knight, using her cloak as a meager shelter but she slept not at all.

Every opportunity she used her magic to ensure she traveled the right direction. From within her cloak she drew a bowl of water with a leaf floating in the center. On the leaf floated a tiny thin bar of steel. No matter how she held the bowl, the bar of steel, tipped black on one side, pointed her way. Dan Surel, the bandit lord, gave this magic to her one dark night. The two of them lay naked under the open black sky dotted with a million burning suns. He smiled at her as she marveled at the strange magic. He showed her how to rub the thin steel on a stone thick with iron. It had saved his life many times, he had told her. When her wonder broke, she smiled at the bandit lord and kissed him hard on the mouth. He had never been kissed like that, she could tell, and he never would again.

Now his magic saved her. She cupped the bowl in her hand, watching the bar point her way through the tearing wall of sand. For three days she traveled through the storm. It ripped her cloak into tatters and scraped her leather thin on her body. She raised her pale blue eyes to the sky and saw the huge red orb of the sun in the sky. The storm's edge was close.

Her satisfaction fell when she saw eleven figures in front of her, standing at the edge of the storm and waiting for her.

One of the figures stood taller than the other ten. Vrenna briefly thought of fleeing to either side or perhaps back into the storm behind her but the foolish thought fell quickly. She would die if she returned into the desert. For three days it had stolen her energy and most of her life. She would not even be able to fight them. These people had found her and they knew she had no where else to go.

With her cloak tight around her, her hood drawn low over her head, and her hand on the hilt of her black saber, Vrenna approached the figures.

The ten smaller men were small and brown skinned, wearing loincloths and carrying spears tipped with beaten iron and wrapped in animal hide. A band of white paint striped across their eyes. They wore sandals on their feet and marked their bodies with black and red swirling symbols. They stared at Vrenna with wide dark eyes and made no sound. They posed little threat to Vrenna, even in her

weakened state, but the taller one was a different story.

He stood still, light brown eyes peering through a leather mask and under the pointed brim of a sun-beaten three-cornered hat. He wore a boiled leather breast plate with markings of the north. His loose trousers tucked into the tops of tall leather riding boots. He wore three belts, one tight around his waist and two crossing low across his hips. From the belt at his waist hung an ornate rapier with a hilt shaped like intertwining serpents. On the lower belts hung two flintlock pistols with hammers carved like the heads of rams.

Vrenna had only seen pistols like those three times before in her life. She stood a fair chance against the man and his native allies but she could not outrun the steel balls of lead thrown by the guns on his waist.

"We have been waiting for you." The man's voice was raspy through the leather mask. "Come with us and we will take you to the one you seek. The White wishes to meet you."

The man beckoned and one of the smaller brown men brought her a skin fat with water. She took it and drank, the water burning cold down her throat. The taller man kept his eyes on her and his hands near the grips of his pistols as the ten pikemen began to walk south. Vrenna followed and the man followed behind her.

"I am Dunkan Frost." Vrenna saw wrinkles in the man's exposed eyes. He had removed the mask revealing the lined face of a man over forty seasons old. A gray-streaked pony tail fell out from under the bottom of his hat. "We will arrive in two days."

They traveled silently until dusk. The natives set up a camp fire and burned flanks of spiced meat on spits. It smelled wonderful. Exhaustion overtook Vrenna. She ate their meat and fell asleep quickly under the cool night sky watching the smoke form a column to the heavens.

She awoke early and saw the man, Dunkan, sitting on his heels and looking over the horizon around them. Vrenna undressed, hoping her lack of modesty would unbalance the man. If it did, he made no sign of it, neither avoid her nudity nor staring at her. The brown men watched her with unblinking dark eyes.

Vrenna dressed light, wearing a small leather chestguard and high cut pants fastened with gold hoops. She replaced her tall boots and pulled on a thin pair of gloves, feeling the three thin slivers of sharp steel

hidden in the lining of the left one. She fastened her wide belt and let her saber hang on her left hip. She replaced the tattered hide cloak with a dark cloak and hood of thin wool. As the sun crested over the horizon, they resumed their southern trek.

All day Vrenna studied Dunkan. He was from the north, betrayed by his pale skin and dark hair. The desert had hardened him like the rest of the desert dwellers. His thin body was corded with tight muscle and almost no fat. The tendons and veins in his neck stood out and when he knelt and balanced on the balls of his feet and stared over the desert he looked like an animal.

Few northerners traveled into the desert and Vrenna had seen none who traveled this far. They chose the protections of their young castles and their huge plantations in the green lands, buying slaves from huge ships along the the eastern shores.

Dunkan wore a thick bladder of water over his side and had given the same to Vrenna. The small hunters, however, carried none. They seemed perfectly at ease in the desert with their dark leathery skin, thin bodies, and calloused hands and feet. If they drank, she had never seen it and had no idea where they would have gotten the water. None could survive in the desert without water.

They camped for the night sheltered by three huge boulders sitting undisturbed in the middle of the flatlands. Dunkan sat near Vrenna, chewing on seasoned meats and scanning the horizon of the night. He spoke to her and Vrenna was aware of the contrast his voice made to the day of silence.

"I know why you have come. The White knows it as well." Dunkan turned and looked at Vrenna. "I came for the same reason two years ago."

"You have no idea what she is like. I had no idea. I don't even remember what my life was like two years ago, sent by my former employers on a fool's errand to die on either the point of a blade or from within a bottle. She found me.

"I crossed the storm you crossed and I nearly died. I came out of it starving and torn and beaten. She was there waiting for me. I nearly drew my guns and shot her but it would have been futile. Instead she talked to me. She fed me and gave me water. She took me in."

"I told her things. I told her about the children I burned in order to draw out Voth skirmishers from their hiding place in the woods. I told

her how they sounded, screaming as the flames melted and charred their skin. I told her how they smelled as the smoke of their bodies filled my lungs. I told her about the fourteen year old boy I stabbed to death for laying a whore I fancied. I told her about the women I raped and killed."

"She smiled at me. She forgave me. She told me that I was not alone, that other good men had done such things and that God would forgive us. I have killed forty one people with my own hands and hundreds more under my orders. I told her about every one of them and she forgave me for each of them."

"I didn't care about the men who sent me. They told me I will travel south to the desert to murder a witch or I will be hanged for my crimes. Agents of the Eye reached into my mind and made me remember things I did not want to remember. It was horrible. When she asked me to do the same it was with my own desire and it was wonderful. I would kill those men now, if I could. I would kill every man, woman, or child that would forsake the White or the God she has given us."

"I will take you to her because it is what she asks. She will talk to you. You will see what she is. You will see what you are."

Dunkan let his words fade into the cool night air. He smiled at Vrenna, stood, and left. Vrenna considered his words before laying down and falling asleep.

Vrenna woke just before dawn. Dunkan was already awake. Vrenna sat up and saw him standing and facing her twenty steps away with is hands on the butts of his pistols. She saw the hard look in his killer's eyes. The ten smaller men stood with him, also looking at her.

Vrenna considered rolling until his pistols were empty but discarded the idea. He was too good to shoot into the dirt. He would take his time and aim, putting a lead ball into her thigh or stomach.

"I need your sword." Dunkan's voice had changed since the night before. Vrenna had no doubt he was ready to fire those guns. "It won't matter if you have it or not when you meet her. Your blade can't harm her. But it will protect us on the way and it will prevent any embarrassing accidents when we're there.

"Take it by the sheath and toss it towards me."

Vrenna kept her eyes on Dunkan. He was very smart. He hadn't tried

to steal it in the night as she slept. He didn't try to wrestle it away from her like so many other men larger than her, now dead. He put her in an impossible situation, a situation with only two options. She would give up her sword or she would die here in the desert and he would return to his witch queen empty handed. He had carefully planned this moment and he was ready for either option.

Vrenna took her black-hilted saber by the leather sheath and tossed it to Dunkan. One of the smaller men fetched it while Dunkan kept his eyes on Vrenna and his hands on his guns. The man who had taken it wrapped it in a blanket and tied it to his back in a webwork of leather bindings. She could get at it again but she'd have to kill all eleven of them before she had the time to get it out of that wrap.

Vrenna knew the sword was only a tool. She was the weapon. She could get another weapon when she needed one. She knew she was not defenseless and she knew Dunkan knew the same.

They continued traveling south. Five of the small native men traveled ahead with five others behind, each holding his iron-tipped spear tight. Dunkan walked behind Vrenna and to her left, always out of range of a physical attack.

Bluffs and plateaus of red rock broke over the yellow horizon. At the top of a large plateau, Vrenna saw a gleam of white. Small buildings dotted the base of the bluff and a thin line cross crossed from the bottom to the top.

They walked through the cyclopean bluffs of ancient rock cut apart by seas burned away centuries ago under the huge red sun. Vrenna understood how unlikely she would have been to find the temple in this land on her own.

They reached the village as the red sun peaked in the yellow sky. A deep trench circled the village's outer buildings, a moat filled with sharp rock. Any attacking force had only one way to reach the village, a single path over the dry moat.

Four men stood guard on the bridge of packed dirt, their faces and bodies painted white. Ornate scars swirled and stretched across their muscular chests. They were larger than the ten men with whom Vrenna had traveled. Those ten must have been hunters, light and able to travel long distances while these men were the warriors and guardians, large and strong. They stared at Vrenna as they passed, stepping aside in response to a single gesture from Dunkan.

They walked through the village on small dirt roads. The villagers lived in huts of red clay and wood. Desert goats pulled crude carts two and from thin farms on the western side of the village. Bare breasted women carried large clay pots of water from deep wells dug into the ground. Naked children ran past them.

They passed by one large hut colored black and spotted with painted white handprints. Skulls, both animal and human, stood on wooden stakes on the roof. When they passed, the huts hide door pushed aside and a woman stepped out. She was small, her own skin and hair pale white. She had sharp pink eyes and long nails on her fingers. A network of beads hung between her breasts. She wore a small loincloth of dark leather embroidered with strange sigils and a knife hung down her hip on a tied leather belt.

For a brief moment, Vrenna thought she had just seen the White, but Dunkan paid the woman no attention and they passed her without word. The woman watched them pass with fire in her eyes.

They approached the base of a walkway that snaked up the side of the plateau. More large men, painted white and carrying crude viscous axes of iron and wood, stood guard over the base of the walkway. They stepped aside as Dunkan approached. Six of the ten men with whom they had traveled left Vrenna and Dunkan at the base of the plateau. Dunkan, Vrenna, and the other four men began the trek up the path to Vul Teven, the Temple of Light.

Two thousand five hundred years earlier, at the height of the old empire, the emperor's sister led the empire's religious order. While the vast golden palaces of the emperor lay in the City of Heaven to the west, the matron priestess appeased the gods of the three heavens and the demon lords of the seven hells from the temple of Light.

It took two hundred years to build the granite dome of the temple, each rock carried from a salt quarry seven hundred miles away. Generations of master stone masons oversaw the construction and ruled over the forty thousand slaves required to build this temple. Twenty five centuries later Vul Teven still stood as empire fell around it and the slave lords took control of the land.

Vrenna was in awe of the temple as they reached the top and walked up the wide steps to the temple's outer platform. Statues of women, one for each of the five heavens, towered into the sky, their arms held high. Their wide hips, large breasts, and round faces spoke of matronly worship. Three sets of steps led to two platforms before

leading to the doors of the temple itself. Ten guards stood on each of the two platforms, their eyes on the party that walked past.

The doors of the temple had broken open long ago and lay in pieces around the base. Guards stood on the broken rock, their dark eyes staring open within their white painted faces, as the group entered the temple's main chamber.

Sunlight illuminated the temple's main hall from circular openings in the two-foot-thick ceiling. Enormous statues representing the five heavens and the seven hells stood at even spaces around the hall. The five female statues stood smooth and proud while the statues of the demon lords were twisted and grotesque monstrosities. They shared a single trait, however. Something had broken off all of their heads and crushed them into small rocks around their bases.

A rectangular pool of blue water split the room down the raised platform of the far end of the hall. Millenia old tapestries faded from centuries in the sun and open air, hung from the domed ceiling.

Vrenna cared little for the sights around her, however. Her nerves were tight wire running throughout her body. Her instincts flared with danger.

"They say the desert was once as lush and beautiful as the northlands." A woman knelt on the floor to Vrenna's left. She made no sound and surprised Vrenna with her even and relaxed voice. "The vanity of the old kings tore open a hole to hell and disease poured out of it like black blood, killing every living thing and turning the green lands into ash and sand."

The woman traced grooves in the temple's floor. She wore a simple white tunic tied at her waist with a cord of rope.

"Creatures crawled out of the black pits and hunted in the lands for the soft flesh of mortals. I never believed these stories. They were myths and legend told by those wishing to control their people or to demand obedience from their children. But now I look at you and I wonder if they are true."

The woman looked up to Vrenna. Her eyes were as blue as the deep sea. Her platinum hair hung free down her back. When she stood, Vrenna saw she was a head shorter than the herself. She wore no jewelry and no other adornments. She padded across the floor on bare feet and sat on one of the stone benches on the side of the hall.

Vrenna was aware that Dunkan had fallen to one knee and knelt before the woman. He swept his hat to the ground. Vrenna felt how close his pistols were to her grasp. She became aware of the three sharp slivers of metal in her left glove. She saw in her mind's eye the hilt of Dunkan's left hand dagger, a wide blade strapped to the small of his back. She had only glimpsed its jeweled hilt two days earlier but she knew it was still there.

"I have lived in this temple for eight years." The woman continued. "I helped these people in the hopes that they would find God. I have helped murderers find themselves and forgive themselves and ask forgiveness from their lord. Yet the lords of the north continue to send assassins to kill me."

"They sent you to kill me."

Vrenna felt her mind open and her body twitch into action. She would dive hard to the left, hitting Dunkan in the throat and taking his left hand blade. She would ignore the pistols. She did not know how to use one and now was not the time to learn. She would use his knife. The time would never be better.

Vrenna couldn't move.

Her arms stuck to her sides. Her legs pinned together. Her balance was off but she was not falling. She felt something squeezing her, holding her in place. She found it hard to breathe.

"We all have blood on her hands, my friend." The woman looked at Vrenna and smiled. There was no malice in those eyes, no egotism. It was a smile of friendship. "We can all be forgiven for our past. He will forgive us."

The tightness let go and Vrenna fell to the ground. Dunkan knelt and helped her up. Vrenna saw the snake-hilted rapier on his waist. It was close. Vrenna did not take it.

They took Vrenna to a room on the outer halls of the temple. A bed of thick hide and fur sat against one wall with a wooden table in the opposite corner. A young brown-skinned girl brought Vrenna a bowl filled with clean water and Vrenna's pack. When the girl left, Vrenna heard the clink of a bar on the other side of the door.

Vrenna took off her clothes and washed. She laid down on the bed and closed her eyes. It had been months since she felt a bed so comfortable. Her discomfort of being so easily unarmed fell away as

she let the strain in her body seep out of her. Sleep found her quickly and she did not awake until mid morning on the following day.

Vrenna awoke to the sounds of the latch unlocking and the door swinging open. The same small servant girl brought in a plate of fruit and spiced lamb. The girl kept her eyes down but Vrenna felt no fear in her. Vrenna considered taking the girl hostage or killing her before the door could be locked again but she saw little advantage and too many unknown possibilities.

No one seemed to fear her and why should they? Vrenna had been completely paralyzed by the White. She had known of the powers of the mind before. She had seen many men rip at their clothes believing they were on fire. She had seen attackers paralyzed by nameless fears of the blackest souls. She had even felt those effects herself from time to time. The White was different. It was not Vrenna's mind that she had paralyzed, but her whole body. This was not a mental force that held her off balance and dropped her; it was physical.

Dunkan appeared at the door as Vrenna swallowed her last piece of lamb. He was a man transformed. His dark cloak and boiled leather armor had been replaced by a loose tunic of tan cloth and a pair of loose trousers. His clean hair hung down his back in a pony tail tied with a leather band. He wore no shoes. Most strangely, he was completely unarmed.

"Some hunters found a scout from a neighboring bandit tribe just outside the village. The White questions him now and she asked for you to join her."

Six of the large white-painted guards stood in the main hall. One held the arms of another olive skinned man, tall and lean. The man's wild hair hung over his shoulders and sharp tattoos of beasts stood out on his muscled chest. A thin mustache and beard covered the sharp angles of his face. He stared at Vrenna with narrowed light brown eyes.

"He says he wandered from his tribe and found our city from the smoke of our fires." One of the guards translated the man's strange language.

"He lies." The White's voice was one of assurance, not anger. She sat on a stone chair on a raised platform at the back of the hall.

The man's body went rigid and the guards backed away from him.

"Ask him again."

The guard spoke to the man in a low guttural voice. The bandit spit back at him. Sweat broke out on his face and his arms slammed to his sides. His feet left the ground. The White stood and tilted her head. The man rose ten feet off of the ground. He began to scream. Vrenna saw his body squeezing in. The man cried out again in the same guttural language.

"He says a band of two hundred bandits ride to the city from the western darkhills. They will arrive at sunset \and attack the city in the dark of night."

"By God the will not!" The White clenched her teeth and Vrenna saw the veins standing out on her neck, pulsing faster and faster. The man screamed again, no longer the cries of a man but the primal cry of a tortured animal. Vrenna heard his ribs crack. One of his legs broke and twisted inward. His elbows snapped and one shoulder popped out of its socket. His belly twisted and Vrenna heard pops of bursting organs within him. His screams stopped as his lungs collapsed. His eyes were wide open and his tongue lolled out of his mouth but all live had been squeezed out of him. The body fell into a sickening twisted heap onto the floor. The room was silent.

"Dunkan. Gather the hunters. We must go to the western fields."

Dunkan bowed.

"Bring her as well. Let her see what God does to the men who would slaughter our people and drag our children off to be slaves."

Vrenna's eyes never left the crushed bandit scout. The White stood and left the hall and entered the eastern hallways. Dunkan guided Vrenna out of the hall to the platform outside. Before they left, Vrenna heard the sounds of weeping echo through the halls.

Vrenna, The White, Dunkan, and twelve of the small hunters walked down the path from the temple of Life to the village below. The White wore a simple white cloak over her tunic, the hood drawn over her head. Dunkan had returned to the vestiges in which Vrenna had first seen him. He wore his leather breastplate, leather three-cornered hat, a black cloak, cross-crossed pistol belts, and the snake-hilted rapier.

Dark eyes followed them as they walked through the village. The white-skinned woman in the large hut stepped out and watched them with pink eyes. Her lips moved over strange words and her hands

twisted into grotesque shapes. Neither the White nor Dunkan paid the strange woman any attention but the others in their party kept their eyes far from her.

They left the city and headed west. After two hours they came to a band of hills that stood over the wide western mudplains. They looked over a plane of broken rock and sand. The red sun burned hot behind them. A cloud of dust rose in the east.

The raiders rode steeds bareback and carried spears of steel and hardwood. Leather caps covered their heads and mismatched armor protected their bodies. It would not protect them for long.

The raiders saw the figures on the hills and rode in hard. Dunkan's pistols were out in a flash, the barrels aimed down to the ground and the ram's head hammers pulled back with two thick metal clicks. He moved much faster than one would expect for his age.

Vrenna looked to the White. The woman's eyes were wide. She shook. The looked like a woman struggling and on the verge of panic. Then the panic turned into fury and hate and bloodlust. Vrenna saw the veins pulsing fast and hard in her temples.

The ground began to rumble. The horses of the raiders stumbled and fell, their riders crashing into the ground. Two shapes grew on the flanks of the raiders. They rose high into the air, four time as high as a man, built of rock and clay and jointed in sand. Their shapes sharpened into huge humanoids. Clouds of dust formed great wings behind them and the roots of trees burned to the ground long ago formed into two sets of horns. Vrenna recognized their forms as two of the demon princes of the seven hells, statues she had seen in the temple of Life.

Vrenna heard the bandits screaming. A spear soared in on one of them and splintered on its stone chest. The rock demon crushed a gathering of bandits into the ground with a huge stone fist. Vrenna saw an explosion of blood and smashed organs spray out of the sides as the fist smashed into the ground.

The other rock demon stomped its way south, crushing four men with every step. Arrows splintered against their rock bodies. The northern rock demon scooped up two men in a hand of clay and stuffed them into a huge jagged maw. It bit down, in a crunch of bone and a splash of gore. Men ran in panic but soon bust into gouts of blood and shreds of flesh under the attack of the rock demons.

Soon every raider had died. Rivers and lakes of blood pooled on the packed earth and mounds of gore roasted under the hot sun. The two rock demons stood still, their fists, mouths, and horns covered in the torn remains of two hundred men.

Vrenna saw the White's body shaking, her eyes wide and her mouth closed tight. Her eyes surveyed the carnage below. Her eyes shut and she fell into the arms of one of the hunters. Vrenna saw the two huge rock demons collapse into piles of broken rock and mud followed soon by the sound their destruction.

Vrenna turned and saw Dunkan staring at her. His eyes returned to the killer's stare she had seen on the morning when he had taken her sword. His pistols were still in his hands.

"Let us return to the temple." He let Vrenna lead the way.

News of their victory traveled ahead of them and already the village celebrated. The white-skinned woman had whipped the people into a frenzy of dance and worship.

The White awoke as they returned and she whispered in strange tongues. When Vrenna could understand her, she whispered of demons under the sand, demons within the people, and the fiery sword of God. She hid her face from the white-skinned woman as they passed her, sobbing into her robes.

Vrenna had never seen a battle like the one this day. She looked to the frail babbling woman in the arms of her fanatically loyal guards and realized that she looked upon the most powerful person in the world. She could unbalance any king in the south and crush castle defenses into dust with a thought. As they ascended the path to the temple above Vrenna listened to the woman's voice and realized that this most powerful creature was totally insane.

Dunkan ordered four guards to take Vrenna back to her room. The temple was in a frenzy of celebration and worry for their queen. Villagers poured up the path behind them and packed the stairs leading to the temple. The white-painted guards held them back from the temple halls. The white-skinned woman stood in the middle of hundreds of others, chanting and holding their arms out to the temple.

Vrenna sat on her bed and listened to the sounds echoing throughout the night. Song, screams, chants of ancient tongues all flowed through the halls of the temple of Live. Darkness fell over the temple and heat lightning cracked orange off of the hills around them.

Vrenna heard the door latch click but it did not open. Vrenna went to the door and pushed it open. The small dark servant girl stood with fear in her eyes and a bundle in her arms. She laid the bundle at Vrenna's feet and stepped back. Vrenna felt the bundle and immediately recognized the weight and feel of the object within, as familiar as her own hands.

Vrenna smiled. The girl ran down the corridor, into the main hall, and out the front doors into the mob of villagers outside. Vrenna unwrapped the scorpion-hilted saber and held it up into the light. Orange lightning from the openings in the ceiling above shone on its shining blade and within the nicks of a hundred previous battles. Vrenna knew the servant girl did not bring the sword to her on her own, someone else had ordered her to do it. Vrenna had a good idea who.

Vrenna walked out to the main hall and to the huge doorway leading to the steps outside. The villagers had built a platform of wood. A huge steer hung from its tied hooves below the platform. It bent and thrashed against its bonds. Below the platform, the white-skinned woman of the village stood naked, arms out and head high. She cried out a stream of dark guttural words into the night air as villagers danced around her. She clapped her hands together and men sliced the steer wide open. Blood poured over the woman's face and body, painting her white skin dark red. The woman's pink burning eyes met Vrenna's own as she raised her arms high and cried out. The villagers cried out with her.

Vrenna turned and headed back into the hall. She saw no guards and no one stopped her as she walked down the set of halls leading to the White's rooms. She heard wailing echo off of the stone corridor. Cries of grief and anger pierced through the roar of the villagers outside.

Vrenna turned a corner and saw Dunkan standing at a pair of huge oak doors. He held his rapier in one hand and his parrying dagger in the other. His hat was gone but he still wore the boiled black chestguard and his network of belts. Vrenna saw wet streams falling from the old man's eyes.

"She wants you to do this but I will not let you harm her while I live." Fresh tears fell from his eyes. "She forgave me. No one ever did that for me, not after the things I have done. She forgave me and took me in when everyone else cast me out.

"I love her."

Dunkan gritted his teeth and gripped the hilt of his rapier. He drew his right foot back and stepped into a fencer's stance. Vrenna held her sabre loose in her right hand and shifted back. Dunkan's eyes closed and he cried out as though struck. He dropped his rapier and dagger to the ground in a clatter of fine steel on stone. He fell back against the hallway wall and sunk down, hugging his knees to his chest as he wept. He drew one of his pistols, put it in his mouth, and fired.

Behind the oak doors, the sobbing continued uninterrupted from the crash of the gun.

The White was on her knees facing away from the door when Vrenna entered. The small woman rocked on her knees, her hands clasped in front of her and her head low. She whispered fast between outbursts of grief. Her head lifted as Vrenna's shadow climbed the wall in front of her. The shadow grew and the White sobbed again.

"I'm sorry, mama."

Vrenna cut hard twice. A gout of blood sprayed across Vrenna's chest and face. It painted a wide band of red across the wall where Vrenna's shadow lay. Vrenna looked at the severed body of the dead woman for a moment, turned, and left.

The Villagers stood silently as Vrenna came out of the temple's doors. The blood soaked white-skinned woman beheld Vrenna with her wide pink eyes. Vrenna wiped a smear of blood away from her eyes. The woman knelt and lay prone, her arms stretched out in the ultimate sign of humility. Behind the woman, the rest of the villagers did the same. Silence fell over the platau housing the ancient Temple of Life. Vrenna looked up to the moon. She could travel east and take a boat back to Gazu Zvaar. She would reach the city in two week's time. Vrenna stepped through the prone villagers and slipped into the dark of night.

Author's Notes: The main seed for Vrenna and the White came from Apocalypse Now but I wanted to add a lot of depth to Dunkan, the converted murdering Gray Wolf. My next Vrenna story, Vrenna and the Little King, shows another pair of Gray Wolves and how horrible they really are when they aren't as nice as Dunkan. The character of the White actually came after I started the story. If you look real close, you'll probably see that you've seen the White before in another world than this. The ending in this one may be a bit hard to take, but I always saw it as inevitable. I had some paragraphs of justification for Vrenna's actions, but I thought it worked better with those left out.

Vrenna is never predictable. If you predict she'll save the White and turn her powers on the stupid prince back in Gazu Zvaar, she'll surprise you by doing what she was told to do. She is, after all, a killer.

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